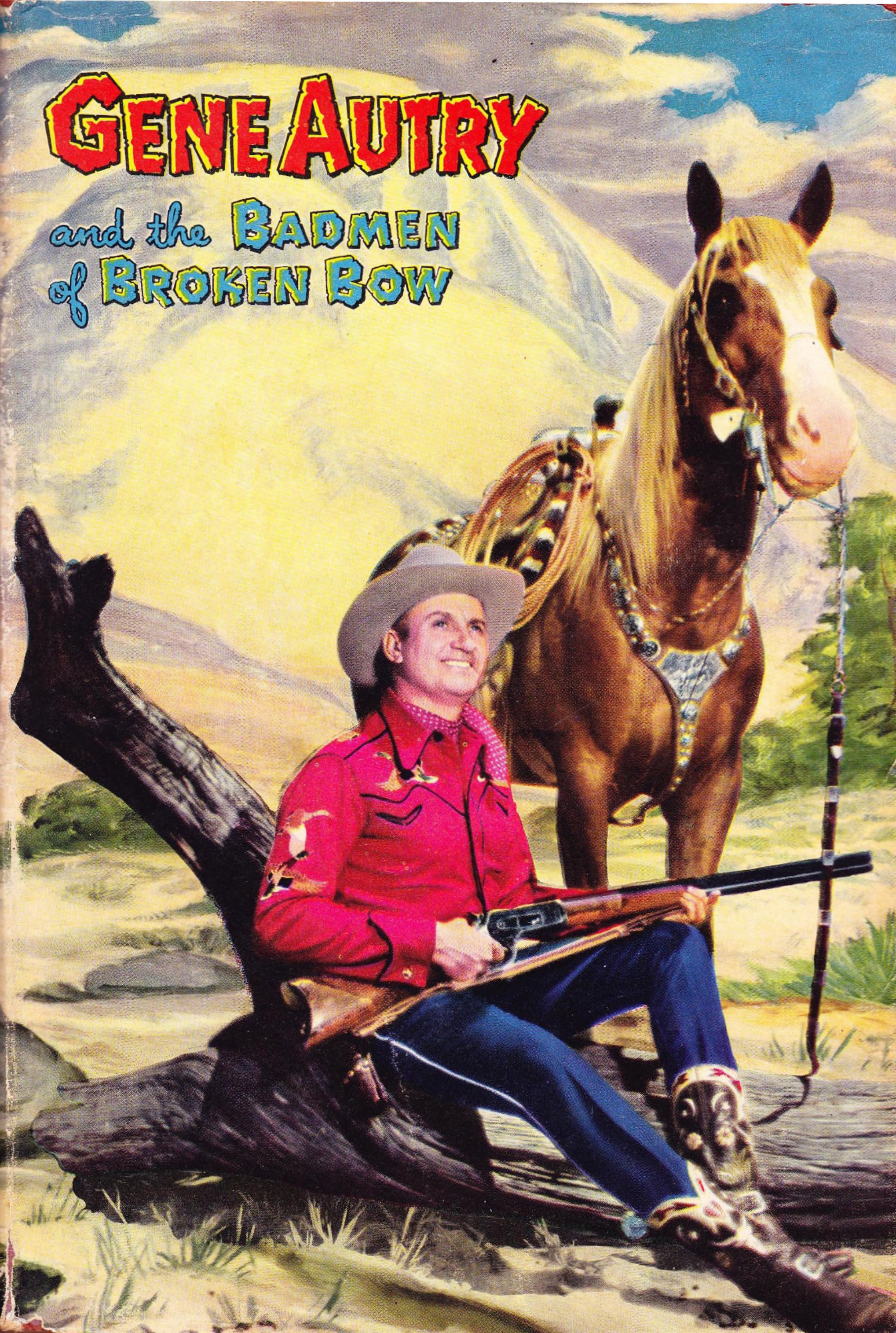
GENE AUTRY and the BADMEN of BROKEN BOW



GENE AUTRY
and the BADMEN of BROKEN BOW

AUTHORIZED EDITION

2355

WHITMAN

Gene Autry

and the

Badmen of Broken Bow

Gene Autry knows he is heading into trouble when he rides his great chestnut horse, Champion, down the trail to Broken Bow. He takes the name of Texas Gene in his attempt to solve fraud, arson, and murder in this small western town. Who tried to take the payroll young Tod Weyland was carrying to his ranch? Why did Tall-Corn Williams, the town gossip, eavesdrop on Gene's conversations? Why was Ezra Binyon, the town's leading citizen, so anxious to have Texas Gene leave town? With the help of the peddler, Flapjack Hobbs, and Tod's pretty sister, Cindy, Gene finds answers to all these questions.

His clear thinking and trigger-quick actions make Gene Autry a favorite American hero for the crowd that follows his adventures through movies, radio, and television.

WHITMAN PUBLISHING CO.
RACINE, WISCONSIN

GENE AUTRY
and the BADMEN of BROKEN BOW



AUTHORIZED
EDITION

GENE AUTRY
and the
Badmen of Broken Bow

An original story featuring
GENE AUTRY
famous motion picture and radio star
as the hero

By
SNOWDEN MILLER

Illustrated by
PETER ALVARADO

Authorized Edition

WHITMAN PUBLISHING COMPANY
RACINE, WISCONSIN

Except for the authorized use of the name of Gene Autry, all names, events, places, and characters in this book are entirely fictitious, and no identification with actual persons, living or dead, is intended or should be inferred.

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ILLUSTRATIONS



"There's San Juan Valley, Champ."

GENE AUTRY
and the
Badmen of Broken Bow

CHAPTER ONE

THE HOLDUP

On the crest of the low-lying but jagged ridge, Gene Autry reined in his great chestnut horse, Champion. Behind the pair, the rising sun was inching its way above a higher ridge to the east. Before them spread rolling rangeland through which a road wound westward like a tattered, sand-colored ribbon. Night's shadows still lingered in the shallow washes spreading like giant fingers down into the levelness from brownish, rounded hills that formed the rangeland's northern border. Here and there, dark masses of cattle stirred to movement as the first rays of the sun slipped over the low-lying ridge to banish the gray of dawn. Far off to the left a thread of blue-gray smoke curled skyward from some chimney hidden in a grove of trees.

A smile crinkled Gene's ruggedly handsome face. "Well, Champ," he said, "there it is. San Juan county—some o' the finest, richest cattle country south o' the Rockies." The smile disappeared in a frown that

held a hint of unhappiness. "Too bad there has to be viciousness an' meanness in such a pretty, restful-lookin' place. But maybe we can do something about that before we're through. Right, boy?"

As if he understood Gene's words, the great horse whinnied and tossed his head. A sunbeam danced along his mane, turning it to red-gold.

Gene laughed. "I declare, Champ, you savvy more o' what I say than most folks do." He pressed his knees lightly against the satiny sides and Champion moved sure-footedly, rapidly down the trail.

The sun climbed higher, and its rays grew warmer. By the time Gene and Champion turned off the ridge trail onto the sand-colored road, the heat was beginning to rise in little waves from the lush pastureland.

"It's goin' to be a scorcher of a day all right," said Gene, slowing Champion to a walk. "Reckon we ought to hit Broken Bow somewhere around noon, even travelin' slow. An' then there'll be a bath for me an' a rubdown for you. Think we can use them?"

Again Champion whinnied understandingly. Gene was sure the great horse was remembering the many dry and dusty miles they had covered since leaving Fort Worth. They had spent a few nights in the doubtful comforts afforded by small cow towns. But for the most part, they had bedded down by a water hole or a little stream with the Texas sands for a mattress and the bright stars for a coverlet.

"Better stick to the back trails as much as possible, Gene," Hugh Crane had told him in the office in Fort Worth. "That way you'll run less risk of being recognized by some high-line rider who might send word to Broken Bow that the famous Gene Autry is heading that way. If the birds we're after hear that, they're apt to put two and two together and make it spell 'getaway.' "

Gene had reddened at his old friend's compliment. He invariably reddened when someone praised him. To him, the rounding-up of outlaws and killers was just a job. It held no glamour, no fascination. Rather, it was more or less distasteful. But it was something that *had* to be done.

The West was growing by leaps and bounds. Settlers by the thousands were streaming across the prairies, conquering the rugged mountains, crossing the turbulent rivers—all because they believed in the future of the West and were willing to risk all they owned, even their lives, on that future. To Gene's way of thinking, these hardy pioneers deserved to be free from hard-eyed, quick-on-the-trigger men who had no respect for the law or the other fellow's life and property. To help bring about this freedom, Gene had dedicated himself. And with Champion's assistance, he had permanently silenced many a badman's guns.

A brisk breeze sprang up, driving the heat before

it. Gene let Champion break into an easy trot. The words of an old rangeland melody came into his mind. He began to hum it to the accompaniment of Champion's hoofs thudding rhythmically on the semi-soft, sandy roadbed. But behind the song, his mind was busy with the problem Hugh Crane had given him to solve.

It was a many-sided problem involving fraud, arson, and perhaps murder. Therefore, the solution would not come easily. Fraud and arson were hard crimes to prove—harder than murder because it was difficult to obtain evidence of a man's *intentions*. And it was equally difficult to trace a splash of kerosene or the burned stub of a match to the hand that had used it. Where a murder was concerned—

The thought broke off sharply in Gene's mind as a distant, yet unmistakable, sound tore through the comparative silence of the rangeland.

"A gunshot!"

As the syllables exploded from Gene's lips, another shot rang out. Mingled with its echoes, his keen ears caught the faint rumble of wagon wheels and placed both sounds as coming from beyond a small, low hogback several hundred feet to the left.

He put extra pressure on the left rein. Champion obeyed the signal instantly but did not wait for the flick of Gene's spurs to break into a gallop. Grass clods sprayed in all directions as he raced over the

strip of meadow separating him from the hogback.

Another shot rang out! It was sharper, more distinct than the others had been. Gene nodded grimly. That meant the gun battle was moving closer. He would not have too far to go to join it.

Champion reached the hogback. Without losing speed, he raced up its steep, rock-ribbed incline. On the crest he hesitated a few seconds. Just long enough for Gene to size up the situation. Then he plunged down the other side, his hoofs striking sparks from the rocks.

The few seconds' pause had been long enough for Gene to get the picture. A buckboard with a single passenger, a man, careening east along a narrow side road—two riders in hot pursuit, their naked six-guns flashing in the sunlight. Such a picture could mean only one thing—a holdup!

Champion was back on level ground now. So far he and Gene had not been discovered. But it would not be long, thought Gene as he reached for his gun. Not only were buckboard and horsemen drawing nearer but, with incredible speed, Champion was racing to meet them.

"But at the angle we're travelin'," Gene said to himself, "there's a good chance we won't be spotted till we're in gun range. That wagon's makin' plenty o' noise an' so are those gunnies' horses. Ought to cover up any noise we're makin'."

The horsemen were firing more frequently now, scarcely ten seconds elapsing between the barkings of their guns. They were riding almost neck-and-neck—one on a white-stockinged bay, the other on a rangy grulla. Anger blazed in Gene's face when he saw that both wore bandanna masks.

"The lowdown coyotes!" he muttered. "Attackin' an unarmed man! That hombre in the buckboard couldn't be packin' a gun. Otherwise, he'd sure be usin' it."

As if he had heard Gene's mutterings, the man in the buckboard slowed his lathered team slightly. Lifting something from the floor, he turned in the seat and raised the object to his shoulder. Gene tensed. It was a long-barreled rifle.

Crack! Crack!

The rifle and one of the pursuers' guns barked together. Apparently the rifle bullet went wide of its mark because neither of the horsemen even so much as swerved in his saddle. But the six-gun's bullet caught the man in the buckboard and spun him around with the force of its smashing into his upper body. With a strangled cry, he slumped to the floor of the wagon.

Gene raised his gun and squeezed the trigger. The shot took off the grulla rider's hat. Again Gene's gun spat lead. This shot ripped through the coat sleeve of the man on the bay.

Now both men turned toward Gene, unloosing a veritable barrage in his direction, but their bullets were wasted. Champion had been in gun battles before. He knew how to protect himself and his beloved master. He twisted and turned, like a sunfishing bronc, but still kept to his forward course.

Once more Gene pressed the trigger. The man on the grulla screamed and grabbed at his shoulder. But when he saw his companion whirl the bay around and spur off across the prairie, he seemed to forget his injury. He turned the grulla sharply and took off after his fleeing companion.

Gene sent a couple more shots after them before he pressed his knees against Champion's sweating flanks in the signal to slow down.

"Hold it, boy," he panted. "We can find those birds later. Right now, we'd better see if we're goin' to take that hombre in the wagon to the doc or to the coroner."

CHAPTER TWO

GENE AND TOD

The buckboard's team, a pair of paint ponies, had come to a halt near the eastern end of the hogback. As he neared them, Gene could hear their loud wheezing as they tried to get their breath after the long, exhausting run. But he could hear no other sound. Not even when he reined Champion in alongside the wagon and listened intently for a soft moan that would tell him the driver was still alive.

A small, sad sigh escaped Gene's lips as he slid from the saddle. Although in his years of outlaw-hunting he had often seen death, he had never become accustomed to it.

The man was a crumpled heap under the buckboard's seat. One foot, encased in a neat black boot, protruded over the step. Through a crack in the flooring, a thin red stream was trickling down to dampen the brown soil of the rutted road.

Gene climbed up on the whiffletree and peered over the dashboard at the crumpled figure. The man's face was hidden, pillowed on one twisted arm. However, Gene needed only one glance to know that he was young. The strip of neck between his red-

brown hair and shirt collar was tanned but free from the crisscrossing wrinkles of middle age, and the fingers of the one hand that was visible were long and supple and slim, as yet ungnarled by years of ranch work.

Gene reached over the dashboard, gently lifted the limp body and was surprised at its lightness.

"Why, he can't weigh more than a hundred an' forty-five, if that much," he muttered, cradling the man in his arms and edging back along the whiffletree.

He made the transfer to the ground without mishap, walked to a clump of mesquite a few feet off the road, and eased his burden to the ground in the mesquite's shade. He gave the thin white face a casual glance, then pressed his right forefinger on the man's wrist. At first he could feel nothing. Then Gene stiffened with excitement. Under his fingers was a feeble, flickering pulse!

Gene ran for his saddlebags. And a moment later he was forcing a strong stimulant, which he always carried for emergencies, through the bloodless lips. Now he took a good look at the other's face. The man was even younger than he had thought.

About twenty-two or three at the most, he thought, approving the clean-cut features. *An Easterner, too, judgin' from the cut o' his shirt.*

Faint traces of color were creeping back into the

pallid cheeks. So Gene turned his attention to the dark wet splotch widening over the left front of the gray flannel shirt. With skilled fingers, he unbuttoned the shirt and laid bare the ugly wound in the firm white flesh.

"Hmmm," he reflected half aloud as he eyed the gaping hole below the young man's left shoulder blade. "An inch lower for that bullet an' he'd be past savin'."

He was putting a makeshift bandage on the cleansed and no-longer-bleeding wound when the youth's eyes slowly opened.

"Wh-where am I?" he murmured. "What happened? Oh!" A note of hysteria came into his voice; fear filled his brown eyes. "Those masked men! They—"

"They're gone," said Gene quietly. "An' you're goin' to be okay if you'll calm down long enough for me to finish dressin' this wound."

The young man closed his eyes and lay very still until Gene had rebuttoned the gray flannel shirt and said, with a reassuring smile, "There now! That ought to hold you till we can get you to town and to the doc."

Then he opened his eyes; they were still fear-ridden. "My money?" he asked anxiously, his hand groping frantically up and down for his side coat pocket. "Did they get it?"



Gene Carefully Bandaged the Wound

Gene shook his head. "Champ an' I managed to chase them off before they got close enough to rob you."

A look of relief spread across the youthful features. It was partly due to Gene's words and partly because the groping hand had felt the bulging wallet in the coat pocket.

"I'm very much obliged to you," he said. "My name is Tod Weyland and—"

"Suppose you just rest an' save the conversation till later," Gene interrupted. "You've lost considerable blood an' while your wound isn't critical—*yet,* it could become so mighty easily."

Gene turned away to repack his first-aid kit in the saddlebags. When he glanced back, Tod was pushing himself to a sitting position. Gene hurried over and knelt to put a supporting arm around the slim shoulders.

"Better take it easy, Weyland," he cautioned, "or you're liable to move around too much and start that wound bleeding again."

"I can't take it easy!" declared Tod. "I've got to move! I've got to get home pronto!"

Gene shook his head. "You mean you've got to get to a doctor."

"But the nearest one is Dr. Foster—in Broken Bow." Tod frowned.

"That's what I figured."

Tod's frown deepened. "But I can't go back there! I've got to get this cash to the ranch or—"

"I'll take it there for you," Gene broke in, "after I take you to town." He saw the look of uncertainty in Tod's face and decided to take a chance. He had had years of experience in reading character from faces. Definitely, Tod Weyland could be trusted. "Maybe I'd better introduce myself," he said. "My name is Autry—Gene Autry."

Tod's uncertain look gave way to one of surprise. "Gene Autry?"

Gene nodded and pulled an envelope from his inside coat pocket. He grinned at the boy. "Here are my credentials."

Hastily Tod scanned the paper Gene held out to him. When he reached the signature, he raised his head. His cheeks were glowing with excitement and his eyes fairly sparkled.

"Golly, Mr. Autry!" he exclaimed. "Ever since I came West, I've been hearing about you and your magnificent work tracking down outlaws. I never thought I'd be lucky enough to meet you, though. Wait till Cindy hears about this! She—"

Reddening, Gene tucked the envelope back into his pocket and interrupted. "Hold on there, young fellow. I don't want Cindy—whoever she is—or anybody else knowin' who I am. Not for a while anyway. So I'm askin' you, as a special favor to me, to keep my

identity confidential till I say it's okay to talk. How about it?"

Tod looked somewhat disappointed but he did not hesitate. "It's a deal, Mr. Autry," he said.

"Thanks." Gene smiled. "Now about Broken Bow an' the doc. Is that a deal, too?"

Tod grinned. "It sure is!" He pulled the bulging wallet from his pocket and held it out to Gene. "I'm sure I can trust *you* not to disappear with the Box-W payroll."

Slowly and carefully, Gene raised Tod to his feet and steadied him.

"Think you can make it to the buckboard?" he asked. "Or do you want me to carry you?"

"I can make it," said Tod. "It's funny but since I found out who you are, I feel a hundred percent better."

"If you don't quit soft-soapin' me," Gene protested, laughing, "I'll have to buy a new an' bigger Stetson when we hit town." He nodded at the buckboard. "How about your lyin' down in back? I'll fix up a pallet with one o' my blankets an' —"

"No, thanks," Tod interrupted. "I'll ride sitting up. If those gunmen are back in Broken Bow by the time we get there, I don't intend to let them see me flat on my back. Besides," he added shyly, "I'd rather like to talk to you while we're riding."

"An' I'd like to talk to you." Gene smiled as he

practically lifted Tod onto the wagon seat. "Fact is, if you feel well enough, I've got some questions I'd appreciate havin' answered."

Tod's eyes widened interestedly. "I'll be glad to answer them—if I can, Mr. Autry."

"How about makin' it 'Gene' an' 'Tod'?" said Gene, replacing his saddlebags on Champion's back. "First names seem more friendly-like, an' I've got a hunch we're goin' to be friends."

Again Tod's eyes sparkled. "I certainly hope so—Gene. I've been out here close to a year now, and you're the only person—outside of Dr. Foster—I've taken to right off the bat. Why, I feel as if I'd known you for a long time."

"Same here." Gene smiled as he climbed into the buckboard.

Tod grinned widely. "Having you say that makes my getting shot almost worthwhile. I—" He broke off to gesture toward Champion. "Wait! You forgot to tie your horse on behind the wagon."

"Don't worry." Gene chuckled. "Champ'll follow right along behind us, an' not too far behind either. On the trail he never lets me out o' his sight if he can help it." He picked up the reins and started to turn the buckboard around. "I suppose this road joins up with the main one?"

Tod nodded. "About half a mile west. I had just turned off the main road when those masked men

bushwhacked me and started shooting."

"How come you waited so long to return their fire?" asked Gene.

The youth flushed. "I'm not too good a shot. And I was afraid what did happen would—that they'd plug me if I stood up to shoot." He hesitated. "I'd sure like to know who tipped them off that I was carrying this cash."

"Who besides yourself knew you had it?"

Briefly, Tod reflected.

"Nobody but Cindy and George Wells, the bank cashier," he said. "He cashed my check this morning. He made a crack, too, about it leaving only ten bucks in my account."

"Who else was in the bank at the time?" Gene asked.

"Nobody," said Todd. "I was the only customer. The first one, too. I was even there ahead of Mr. Binyon. He's the bank president. He was coming in as I was going out."

"Binyon, huh?"

Tod gave Gene a searching look. "Do you know him?"

"No." Gene was a trifle brusque. "Could he have known you had this money?"

"Not unless Wells told him," replied Tod. "And even if he did know, he wouldn't be apt to tip off road agents about it. Why, Ezra Binyon's about the

richest, biggest, most important man in all of San Juan county!"

For a moment, Gene stared into space. Then he asked, "What about this girl, Cindy?"

A smile crinkled Tod's mouth. "Cindy is my eighteen-year-old sister, Gene. She came out from the East last month, after Mother died. We're partners in the Box-W but, of course, Cindy doesn't do any ranch work. She keeps house and does a fine job of it, too." His eyes clouded with anxiety. "And she'll be in one big tizzy when I don't show up by noontime. As far as the boys are concerned, though, it will be okay. They promised to give me till five o'clock to get back with the money."

Gene guided the paint team around a giant tumbleweed turning a somersault across the road. "What was that about the boys giving you till five to bring back the money? I don't savvy."

"They sent a delegation up to the house last night." Tod scowled. "They demanded their wages to date. I tried to talk them into waiting till after roundup next month. Then I'll have plenty of money because I've already got a buyer for my beef. But they wouldn't hear of it. Curly Ransome, my range boss, said if I didn't pay them in full today, they were through!"

He winced as the buckboard rattled over an extra large bump in the road.

Gene did not notice either Tod's wincing or the bump. He was deep in thought. When he finally spoke, he spoke slowly and sounded as if he were thinking out loud.

"That's a mighty queer notion for a bunch o' cowpokes to get in their heads," he said. "Usually they're more than willin' to play ball with the boss. Maybe somebody's been talkin' to them—somebody who wants you to be broke for some strange reason or other. Have you got any idea why somebody might want that?"

When Tod did not answer, Gene repeated the question. Still Tod did not reply. A little provoked, Gene turned toward the youth, and a cold chill ran down his spine.

Tod's head had fallen back. His face was ghastly pale. His eyes were closed. And on the front of the boy's gray-flannel shirt, a fresh red stain was slowly spreading.

Almost savagely, Gene pulled up the team. Again he reached for Tod's wrist and sighed with relief when he felt the pulse against his fingers. Although the pulsing was uneven, it was much stronger than when he had felt it earlier.

"That does it!" he muttered, swinging over the wheel to the ground. "From here on in, that young idiot rides lyin' down—and he keeps quiet, too! I only hope I'm lucky enough to be able to stop that

bleedin' again. It looks pretty bad."

Twenty minutes later, Gene had not only stopped the bleeding but had taken his bedroll from Champion's back, wrapped Tod in it, laid him in the back of the wagon, and was driving along the main road toward Broken Bow.

CHAPTER THREE

THE GAUNT MAN

It was close to noon when the Weyland buckboard rattled into Broken Bow. Half an hour earlier, Tod had regained consciousness. But when he had tried to talk, Gene had sternly silenced him.

"If you're set on committin' suicide," Gene had said, after explaining how Tod happened to be riding in back, "go ahead an' use up your strength by chatterin'. But I don't know that I can stop that bleedin' a *third* time."

Tod had opened his mouth but closed it again without speaking. A wan smile had played over his face as he had looked at Gene's straight, uncompromising back. And mingled in the gratitude that was mirrored in his eyes was respectful admiration.

"Some swell hombre!" he said to himself.

Those three words had gone over and over in his mind. They had become a refrain keeping time with the rattling wheels and the drumming hoofs of the team. This refrain had finally put him to sleep.

When Gene, glancing back to check on his passenger, saw the youth was sleeping, he had smiled too. He had urged the team to put on a little more speed

not enough to jar the buckboard, though. In spite of the fact there was color in Tod's face again and the pain lines around his mouth were less pronounced, Gene knew he was in a serious condition from loss of blood. He must reach a doctor as soon as possible.

Gene's first glimpse of Broken Bow brought an exclamation of incredulity from him. The town resembled every other town of the great Southwest in its general layout, but there the similarity ended. Broken Bow's broad main street was tree-shaded and fairly cool, not drenched with sun and heat. Its buildings were solidly constructed and clean with paint; not one was ramshackle or weather-beaten. Its sidewalks were stone blocks instead of warped boards, and there was not a sagging hitchrack or a dilapidated watering trough anywhere. Instead, the hitchracks were strong and straight and, to Gene's practiced eye, recently whitewashed. He could see two watering troughs. They were whitewashed, too, and reinforced with iron barrel hoops.

"Crane should have prepared me for this." Gene chuckled. "Why, it's a regular metropolis."

He spotted a white, one-story building on the right side of the street. It bore a neatly lettered sign:

HENRY FOSTER, M.D.
OFFICE

There was an empty space at the hitchrail in front of this building. Gene turned the team into it.

As the buckboard came to a stop, Tod opened his eyes. "Gene?" he called softly.

Gene turned in the seat. "No talkin'!" he said firmly.

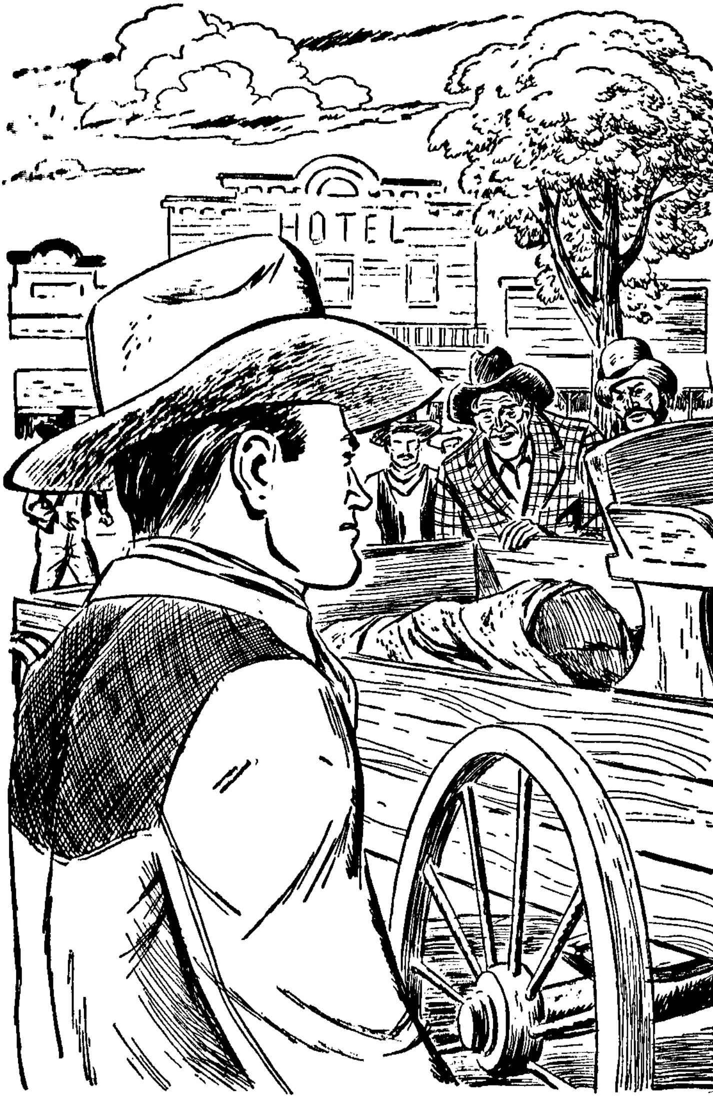
"I just wanted to ask—are we in town?"

Gene nodded, looped the reins around the whip-stock, jumped to the ground and started for the back of the wagon. He had not taken more than three steps, however, when he was suddenly and roughly surrounded by an excited crowd. Where the crowd had come from, he had no idea. The street had been practically empty a moment earlier. Only an old man in a plaid jacket had been in sight, and this oldster had been snoozing peacefully under one of the shade trees.

Gene's glance swept the crowd, clustering about the back of the buckboard. The old man in the plaid jacket was leaning over the edge of the wagon, peering at Tod. He was also yelling, unintelligibly to Gene, and waving his arms in a flailing motion. Obviously it was his shrilling cries which had summoned the pushing, jostling spectators from stores, cafe, and hotel.

Gene elbowed his way through the crowd. When he reached a point from which he could see Tod, he was relieved to discover the youth had closed his eyes and was feigning unconsciousness.

Around Gene, voices rose and fell.



A Crowd Gathered Around the Wagon

"Tod Weyland!"

"Is he dead?"

"What happened to him?"

The old man caught sight of Gene. "There's the hombre that was drivin' him," he screeched. "He oughtta know what's up." With the flat of his hands, he shoved a couple of curious small boys aside, thus making room for Gene at the side of the wagon. "What say, mister? How'd young Weyland git hurt?"

"He was shot!" snapped Gene. "An' if you folks don't move back an' let me carry him into Doc Foster's office *muy pronto*, he's goin' to die!"

The crowd gasped, then fell back in awed silence. As Gene lifted Tod from the buckboard, however, it pressed in again.

The old man pushed against those in the front row. "Git back!" he shouted. "Give the cowpoke room tuh walk! Blast yore hides! Move!"

The crowd moved, but only a few inches. Gene was opening his mouth to take up where the oldster had left off when the doctor's office door banged open. A short, stocky man, with a veritable mane of iron-gray hair flying about his round red face, erupted out onto the sidewalk.

"One side, you pop-eyed popinjays!" he bellowed, waving his green-shirted arms as though they were arms of a windmill. "Or I'll get my shotgun and empty it into your curiosity-ridden carcasses!"

The crowd moved, rapidly and completely. Gene strode through the aisle their backward stepping created. The short, stocky man had bounced back into the office. Gene followed, smiling inwardly at the rapidity with which the physician's words had moved the crowd.

The office was shadowed and cool. It held a pungent but not unpleasant smell of antiseptics. From what Gene could see as he crossed the room to lower Tod onto a sheet-draped couch, it was also spotlessly clean. It flashed through his mind that Dr. Henry Foster might be responsible for the spick-and-span appearance of Broken Bow.

The short, stocky man was slipping a white linen jacket over his green shirt. "I'm Dr. Foster," he announced.

"Glad to know you, Doc," said Gene. "I—"

"Never mind the introductions, and don't call me 'Doc,'" the physician interrupted. "I detest nicknames." He opened a small cabinet and disclosed several shelves filled with gleaming instruments. "I know the patient is Tod Weyland. I know he's been shot." He turned from the cabinet to frown at Gene. "And that's all I need to know now. So if you don't mind—" He nodded jerkily toward the door. "Please don't slam it."

Gene did not move. He simply stood there and stared at the doctor who had turned back to the cabi-

net. He was both irritated and amused at the other's manner.

"Well?" Dr. Foster glared at him with undisguised animosity.

"I was leavin'," said Gene walking unhurriedly toward the door. "But I'll be back later this afternoon. If young Weyland is well enough by that time, I'd like to see him. I have some mighty important business to discuss with him."

"Humph!" snorted Dr. Foster, glancing out the front office window. "If that man crossing the street is coming here, and I'm reasonably sure he is, you'll have other 'mighty important business' to discuss immediately—business with the law!"

A low murmur went up from the crowd as Gene closed the office door behind him. He stood, back against it, watching the approach of a broad-shouldered man with a shining star on his coat lapel. The star was a large one. The letters it contained were large, too; they spelled SHERIFF.

Behind the sheriff trotted the plaid-coated old man. There was a broad grin on his wrinkled face. He looked as if he were gloating over the fact that he had been the one to go for the law.

Before I'm many hours older, thought Gene, *I'm goin' to find out who that old galoot is. One thing's sure; he's the town busybody!*

The sheriff stopped in front of Gene. His dark gray

eyes bored into the latter's face. As regards feet and inches, the sheriff was not a tall man but he *looked* tall. Whether he gave this impression because he carried himself like a military man, or because his overly long legs were out of proportion to his barreled chest and extremely broad shoulders, Gene could not decide. Anyway, not in the few seconds that elapsed between the sheriff's halting and his speaking.

"I'm Thomas Garey, sheriff o' San Juan county," the lawman said in a crisp, clipped voice. "What happened to Tod Weyland? An' how did you get mixed up in it?"

Tersely, Gene explained. While he was talking, Garey continued to stare full into his face. This did not disconcert Gene. He had used the same trick many times, himself, and knew why the sheriff was doing it. The lawman wanted to be sure Gene was telling the truth. If he were lying, there was a chance he might betray himself by a shifting glance or a nervous twitching of the mouth.

"I see," nodded Garey when Gene had finished. "Lucky for Weyland you happened along when you did. He oughtta be mighty grateful to you for savin' his life an' his cash both."

"I only did what anybody on the right side o' the law would do," said Gene.

Sheriff Garey's eyes narrowed. "Why did you say that?" he asked sharply.

"Because it's the truth," replied Gene. "Anybody else would have done the same thing."

"I didn't mean that. I meant the part about bein' on the right side o' the law." The sheriff was scowling now.

Gene smiled. "That happens to be true, too, Sheriff."

"Maybe. But when a man's law-abidin', he don't usually make a point o' boastin' about it." The sheriff let his eyes travel from the crown of Gene's Stetson to the tip of his dusty boots and back to his face before he continued. "What's your name, mister?"

" 'Texas Gene.' " Gene hung onto his smile. If he angered Garey, the lawman might insist upon searching him. And if those credentials were found, he might as well head back for Fort Worth pronto. He would stand little chance of solving Hugh Crane's problem if the man, or men, responsible for it knew who he was.

" 'Texas Gene,' " the sheriff repeated. "That sounds like a gambler's handle. An' if that's what you are, you might as well keep movin'—right out o' town. We've got too blasted many o' your kind around here now, an' —"

"You're barkin' up the wrong tree, Sheriff," Gene broke in. As he continued, he made his drawl a bit more pronounced. "I'm only a trail hand lookin' for a job. Seein' as it's almost time for fall roundup, an'

seein' as how this county's goin' to be trailin' a heap o' critters to market, I figured I oughtta land on somebody's payroll without too much trouble."

Sheriff Garey did not look convinced. "Where did you work before?"

"Where didn't I?" Gene chuckled.

"Where in particular?" the sheriff barked.

"Gosh, Sheriff," Gene drawled, "it would take me a couple of hours to name them all. But, in a general manner o' speakin', I've punched an' trailed from the Rio Grande to Powder River."

A dry cackling laugh followed Gene's words. It was followed by a thin rasping voice.

"To my mind," the voice said, "that's a mighty smooth way of describing a shiftless, no-good range bum."

Gene's blue eyes flashed fire. He whirled toward the speaker, a gaunt, stoop-shouldered man in the forefront of the crowd. But as he looked into the man's face, Gene held back the hot words ready to spill from his lips. For, instinctively, he knew that this gaunt man with the deep-socketed pale green eyes, would welcome anger. It would give him an excuse to do more than merely stand there, grinning like a death's-head.

The crowd was very quiet. It seemed to be holding its breath, waiting for Gene's answer. When he finally gave it, he knew from the crowd's collective expres-

sion that both the answer and his manner of giving it were wholly unexpected.

First Gene let a mocking smile curve his mouth and light his eyes. Then he bowed stiffly to the gaunt, pale-eyed man. And lastly he drawled in a voice laced with derision, "Reckon it wouldn't be worth my while to start arguin' with you, mister. Just about the time I'd get goin' strong, it'd be time for you to crawl back under your rock again."

A small scar at the corner of the gaunt man's thin-lipped mouth glowed like a flame. His eyes glowed red, too, with maniacal fury and unadulterated hatred. He began to speak but Gene did not hear his words. Gene had crossed the sidewalk, slipped under the hitchrack and was forking Champion.

As he turned the big chestnut toward the center of the street, Gene glanced back. Sheriff Garey was disappearing into the doctor's office. The plaid-coated old man was literally doubled-up with laughter. But the gaunt man with the pale green eyes had been swallowed up by the crowd that, once more, had become a milling mass of humans.

Gene sent Champion flying down the street, out into the open country on the road toward the Box-W ranch. There was nothing like a good fast gallop to clear a man's mind. But as the town was left behind and the heat of the prairie began to close in again, he slowed Champion. It would take more than a few

miles of hitting the breeze to make him forget the gaunt man's face. Without a doubt, it was the cruelest, coldest, most evil face he had ever seen. And Gene Autry had seen a lot of faces.

CHAPTER FOUR

AT THE BOX-W

A small, smoothly planed board swung between a pair of wrought-iron hooks above the wide, rustic gate. Reining in, Gene read the top line of words painted on it in brilliant red. BOX-W RANCH—T. WEYLAND. Underneath Tod's name, someone had painted in smaller white letters, AND C. WEYLAND. From the fineness of the lettering and the little curlicues on the C and W, he concluded no masculine hand had painted this second line. Evidently Cindy Weyland, although a tenderfoot, was proud of her partnership.

He leaned from the saddle to lift the locking-bar of the gate. As he straightened, Champion moved forward. Gene grinned.

"Okay, boy," he said, "go ahead an' open it. But if this fancy-lookin' gate is like most ranch gates, you're goin' to have to give it one good hard shove."

Champion pressed his shoulder against the gate's top bar. When the gate swung open easily, Gene was surprised. Most cattle ranchers were too busy with their herds to pay much attention to such minor details around the ranch as well-oiled gate hinges;

plainly, Tod Weyland was different.

Riding up the ranch road, Gene saw other evidences of Tod's attention to details. The sandy roadbed had been overlaid with fine gravel which, in turn, had been rolled down into a smooth, compact mass. Bordering the road were cactus plants of various sizes and shapes, interspersed with patches of bright bluebonnets.

He glanced ahead at the ranch house. It was a moderately large structure with a block stone foundation. Lying flat against its coat of white paint were trim green shutters. The shutters flanked both the upstairs and first-floor windows. A roofed porch ran across the front of the house. On the porch railing stood varicolored flowerpots, most of them containing small cactus plants.

The well-constructed outbuildings were painted red with white trim. The corral looked solid. Close to it was a rustic hitchrack. Additional beds of bluebonnets were scattered in haphazard attractiveness about the front yard and a couple of rustic benches were inviting under a spreading cottonwood tree.

Gene smiled. If Tod Weyland could raise cattle as well as he could dress up a ranch, Box-W beef was sure to be prime stuff.

Drawing nearer to the house, Gene became aware of sounds. The crack of an ax biting into hard wood —the reedy voice of some unseen cowhand raised in

a ditty about the notorious Sam Bass—the thud of hoofs as one of the horses in the corral suddenly cut loose and began to pitch around the circular enclosure as if someone had thumbed him. Gene half expected someone to hear his approach and come to meet him, but no one did. If it had not been for the *sounds* of humans, he would have thought the place completely deserted.

With a friendly whinny, Champion came to an abrupt halt. Then Gene saw the girl. She was standing on the top porch step, her short curls shining copper-red in the mid-afternoon sun. Her round-necked, short-sleeved blue dress made her look more like fifteen than eighteen.

Gene slid from the saddle and walked toward her, hat in hand.

"Howdy, ma'am. Are you Miss Cindy Weyland?"

"I am." Her voice was soft and smooth like her skin; her dark eyebrows were questioning arches. "And you?"

"Your brother asked me to come out," Gene began. "He—"

"How nice," she interrupted. Her smile was only a surface one. Her long-lashed brown eyes, replicas of Tod's, were shadowed with anxiety. "I'm sorry he isn't home at the moment. Would you care to wait? I—" she faltered slightly "—I expect him shortly. In fact, when I heard your horse, I thought it was

he coming up the road."

Gene wished he might let her go on talking. Her voice was so pleasing after the twanging drawl to which his ears were accustomed. But he was the bearer of unpleasant news and the sooner he broke it to her, the better.

"I'm afraid you don't understand, Miss Weyland," he said. "Your brother asked me to come out—with this!" He held out the bulging wallet.

She shrank from it, the color draining from her oval face.

"Tod's wallet!" she gasped. "Where did you get it? How did— What's happened to him?"

"He'll be okay," said Gene. "He's at Doc Foster's office an'—"

"What happened?" she repeated, her voice threaded with distress.

"A couple o' road agents tried to hold him up. Before I could chase them off, Tod caught a bullet in his upper chest."

Cindy sat down on the top step and covered her face with her hands.

Gene shifted uncomfortably. He never knew what to do or say when a woman cried. Tears made him feel helpless; they were the only things that did.

"Now, ma'am," he said after a few seconds, "don't go to cryin'. Your brother's goin' to be all right. Believe me, I wouldn't say that if it wasn't so."

"I'm not crying," said Cindy without uncovering her face. "I'm trying to keep from it. Please don't say anything more—not right now."

One minute went by. Then another. Gene stood motionless and silent, looking down at the bowed head with its cap of short-cropped curls. He had an impulse to pat those curls as one would pat the head of an unhappy child. But he did not do so. Cindy Weyland was not a child; she would be sure to resent such an act as undue familiarity.

He turned away from her to check on Champion. The big chestnut had found a patch of shade near the hitchrack and was, apparently, enjoying the coolness it afforded. Gene glimpsed a watering trough beyond the hitchrack. But he did not worry over Champion's drinking until he had cooled off. Champion knew well enough how to take care of himself.

His eyes turned skyward to watch a hawk circling in the cloudless blue. When he heard a slight rustling movement behind him, he swung back toward Cindy. She was rising to her feet, gracefully, effortlessly.

"I'm all right now," she said. "Please come inside and tell me the whole story, right from the beginning."

The long living-room was simply but tastefully furnished. There were deep-cushioned chairs, a couple of tables, a well-filled bookcase and two wide couches. The couches flanked a large stone fireplace

that almost filled the west wall. Navajo rugs dotted the varnished floor and a bright serape was a splash of color over a small organ standing directly opposite the front door, But it was the "woman touches" that caught Gene's eye—a bouquet of bluebonnets frothing over a white vase on a table, filmy white curtains fluttering at the open windows, a sweet-grass sewing basket topped with folds of some delicate green material. For a brief moment Gene envied Tod Weyland.

Cindy sat down in a small armless rocker and gestured at a near-by easy chair.

"That's a very comfortable chair, Mr.— I don't believe I caught your name," she said.

"I didn't say it." Gene smiled, relishing the comfort of the chair. "It's—" He hesitated. Should he let Cindy share his secret, too? He decided it would be the only fair thing to do. If Tod were to be laid up any length of time, he might be compelled to ask her help in obtaining information—or even in setting an eventual trap. He could not ask that help in the future if he were not frank now. "It's Autry," he finished.

Cindy's expression did not change. Evidently she was too newly arrived from the East to know who and what he was. For the moment, he decided not to enlighten her.

"I'm very glad to know you, Mr. Autry," she said.

"Now will you please tell me, as briefly as possible, all you know about Tod's—uh—accident?"

Gene told the story simply, straightforwardly. He tried to minimize the danger Tod had been in as well as his own part in the incident. At the same time, he tried not to sound calloused or casual about either. When he finished, he saw that Cindy had lost her pinched look. She was smiling, and not just with her mouth, with her eyes, too.

"I'm very grateful to you, Mr. Autry," she said. "And I shall never forget what you have done today." Her glance darted to the bulging wallet in her hand, then to Gene. "I'd like to show my appreciation in something more substantial than words." Her fingers fumbled with the wallet.

Gene shook his head. "Out here, ma'am," he said a little coldly, "we don't accept cash for savin' somebody's life."

Her cheeks crimsoned with embarrassment. "I'm sorry," she apologized. "I didn't mean to insult you."

Gene half smiled. "An' I didn't mean to sound as though I was insulted. Reckon I kind o' forgot you were new to our ways." He kept on talking to give her a chance to recover her poise. "But you see, Miss Cindy, out here in the West, we don't put near as much stock in cash as we do in friendship." Seeing she had lost her confusion, he added, "But there is *one* thing you can do for me."



"We Don't Take Cash for Savin' a Life!"

"What is that, Mr. Autry?"

Gene leaned forward, lowering his voice. "You can call me 'Texas Gene,' or just plain 'Gene,' instead o' 'Mr. Autry.' I'm kind o' anxious to keep my real identity secret till—well, till I finish a mighty important job I came to San Juan county to do."

Her face lighted with interest. "Are you a detective?" She barely whispered the words.

Gene chuckled. "Some folks might call me that. But I've always thought o' myself as a cowpoke who strays off his home range now an' then to give the law a hand."

Cindy nodded. "I've heard of men like you," she said slowly, "and what you're doing to make the West safe for people like Tod and me. There is so much danger—so many evil men—" She left the sentence unfinished and, looking back at the wallet, sighed. "I presume I'd better go out and pay the men. They haven't done any more than was absolutely necessary all morning."

Gene smiled at her. "Would you like me to come along, Miss Cindy?"

"Oh, yes!" she exclaimed. "I haven't had any experience dealing with rebellious cowboys. Not that all of them are defiant, but Curly Ransome—well, he's quite a handful."

"Curly Ransome?" Gene repeated, shortening his stride to match hers as they crossed toward a door to

the left of the organ. "Your brother spoke about him. He's your range boss, isn't he?"

"Yes, and he's sulking because he isn't the foreman." With her hand on the doorknob, Cindy paused. "I suppose we'll have to give him that job now. Tod won't be well enough to go back to work for some time, I imagine."

"Your brother's been actin' as his own foreman?" asked Gene.

"Yes," said Cindy. "Not only to save money but to see that things ran exactly as he thought they should." Pride glowed in her eyes. "You see, Mr.— I mean, Texas Gene, Tod took a course in agriculture at Cornell University. He has very definite ideas about ranching. He and Curly don't see eye-to-eye at all. Tod won't like Curly being foreman." She shrugged. "But what can I do? I don't know anything about ranching, and it's getting near to roundup time and—"

"Maybe I can help," Gene broke in.

The gleam of unshed tears was in her eyes when she raised them to his. "How wonderful of you to suggest that!" She sounded a little choked. "I really need help. I'm such a greenhorn."

Gene gave her shoulder a quick, reassuring pat, sure that now she would not resent his touch. "Suppose we take care o' the boys' wages," he said, "an' then talk about the foreman's job, if you like."

Cindy blinked and turned the doorknob to which she had been clinging. "I'd very much like to," she quavered.

They were both too intent on the Box-W problems to notice the shadow of a man moving away from one of the open living-room windows. He was a tall, sinewy man in his middle twenties, with slate-gray eyes and sandy hair curling tightly under the wide brim of his dust-streaked sombrero. As he hurried toward the back yard, he was scowling.

"So that saddle-stiff thinks he's gonna take over roddin' this spread, huh?" he growled under his breath. "Well, I'll change his mind, pronto!"

CHAPTER FIVE

DOG-FIGHT

The sandy-haired man was ambling across the yard toward the barn when Gene and Cindy came through the back door of the ranch house. He did not look as if he had ever hurried anyplace.

Cindy called to him.

"Curly!"

He stopped and turned his head.

"Yeah?"

At the insolent tone and manner, the muscles bunched along Gene's jaw, but he said nothing. This was Cindy's show. As long as it ran fairly smoothly, he would keep still. But if things started to get out of hand, he would not only speak, he would act. And fast!

"Please call the men together, Curly," said Cindy. "I'm ready to pay them."

Curly Ransome pushed his stiff-brimmed hat back from his forehead and came leisurely across the yard. "I didn't know the boss was back." He spoke to Cindy but he was looking at Gene.

"He's not." Cindy indicated Gene. "This gentleman brought the money out from town."

"Wal," drawled Curly, "that was right nice o' him, wasn't it?"

Cindy flushed. "I think so!" For the first time, her voice held a trace of irritation.

A thin smile flitted across Curly's long-jawed face. He kept his eyes on Gene's. "Stranger in these parts, ain't you?"

Gene nodded. Before he could speak, however, Cindy made a gesture of annoyance.

"Oh dear!" she said quickly. "I *am* a scatterbrain. I forgot to introduce you two. This is Mr. — uh, Mr. Texas Gene, Curly. Gene, this is Curly Ransome, our range boss."

Curly's right hand eased upward. Thinking the movement meant a handshake was coming, Gene started to hold out his own hand. Instantly he realized his mistake, for Curly pretended not to see it. He was flipping a sack of tobacco and a package of cigarette papers from his shirt pocket. Without changing expression, Gene kept his hand moving up to his neckerchief. The scarf was not awry but he made quite a business of straightening it.

Cindy wore a puzzled look. She knew something had happened between the two men, but she could not figure out what it was.

"Please call the men, Curly," she said. "I'd like to get this wage-paying business over with as soon as possible. With money in their pockets, perhaps

they'll go back to work."

"You can count on that," said Curly. He swaggered away in the direction of the bunkhouse.

Cindy turned to Gene. "Come on. We'll go over to the office. That's where the records are."

"Lead the way, ma'am," said Gene.

The office proved to be a small lean-to next to the harness room. It contained a small, rough board table, a chair with a broken arm, an unlocked safe, and a three-legged stool.

"Some office, isn't it?" giggled Cindy. "But one of these days, we'll have a real one—when the Box-W herd numbers five thousand head."

Like everything else Gene had so far seen on the ranch, Tod's records were scrupulously neat. They were also easy to understand and complete as of the preceding day.

"Look," said Cindy. "Tod even has the payroll ready for the men to sign." She laid a long sheet of paper on the table. Down one side of it ran a list of names; each name had a figure marked after it.

Gene glanced out into the yard. "An' here come the boys, rarin' to oblige," he chuckled.

Counting Curly, there were thirty-one hands and Hop Low the cook, a small, slim Chinese with a face resembling a wrinkled parchment map. Curly took his stand on one side of Cindy who had seated herself at the table. Gene moved to the back of the lean-

to, propping himself against the rear wall. He looked as if he were merely a disinterested spectator, but had anyone peered under the shadow of his hat brim, they would have seen that his keen eyes were not missing a trick.

The men filed past the table in a single line. As they did so, Gene studied their faces. Out of the group, he found only two faces whose owners he decided would bear investigation. One belonged to a swarthy-complexioned man with a cast in his left eye; the other was that of a spindle-shanked youth whose mouth curled sneeringly and whose narrow-lidded eyes reminded Gene of the eyes of a rattlesnake. The swarthy man's name was Manuel Jones; he was one of the horse wranglers. The youth's name was Hack Hill. He was listed in Tod's books as a rough string rider, but Gene had a hunch Hack Hill knew more about brand blotching than bronco-busting.

Most of the men looked somewhat embarrassed when Cindy read out their names and handed them their wages. Several attempted to stammer apologies for their behavior of the past twenty-four hours but Cindy cut them short with a curt, "We will not discuss the matter."

It was close to an hour before the wallet was practically empty and the last man had signed the payroll and left the lean-to.

Closing the ledger, Cindy looked up at Curly. "I

hope there will be no more trouble with the men," she said. "At least, not while my brother is laid up."

The tall range boss stiffened with surprise. "You mean the boss is sick?"

"Not exactly," replied Cindy. "He is suffering from a gunshot wound. Two men attacked him while he was coming back from town. Texas Gene saved his life and the money, too. So—" She hesitated, tossing a quick glance back toward Gene.

There was uncertainty in the glance but Curly did not see it.

"I savvy," he snapped, jumping to an unwarranted conclusion. "This jasper's gonna take over as caporal o' the Box-W. Well, I'm not takin' that lyin' down. If anybody's gonna be foreman o' this spread while your brother's ridin' the bed wagon, it's gonna be *me*—Curly Ransome! An' if you don't like it, you know what you can do about it."

Cindy's face was scarlet; her eyes glittered with angry sparks. "I certainly do know!" she cried, jumping to her feet. "I can discharge you, and that's what I'm doing this very minute!"

Curly sneered. Both he and Cindy seemed to have forgotten Gene standing back in the shadows watching silently.

"Just you try it, Miss Highty-Tighty," Curly growled. "Believe me, I'll make you the sorriest white woman in—"

"That'll be about enough, Ransome!" Gene's voice cracked through the lean-to like the lash of a blacksnake whip.

Curly whirled on him. "Who asked you to butt in?"

"Nobody." Gene walked forward, out of the shadows.

Although Gene looked calm and undisturbed, Cindy knew he was furious. There were thin white anger lines at the corners of his mouth and his arms were rigid against his sides.

"I'm doin' it on my own," Gene added.

"Yeah?" Curly gave Cindy a quick but nonetheless insolent look. Then he laughed.

There was no mistaking the insult in his laughter. Not for Gene, although he realized that Cindy did not savvy it. Her eyebrows were almost meeting over the bridge of her tip-tilted nose as she frowned in puzzlement.

Gene stiffened. His eyes were glittering pinpoints of blue steel. Slowly his gloved fingers closed into his palms. But when he spoke, his voice was very low and very soft.

"I'll give you thirty seconds to apologize to Miss Weyland, Ransome," he said.

Curly laughed again. "I ain't apologizin' to nobody. An' so what're you gonna do about it?"

"This!" Gene emphasized the word with a jolting

right-hand blow to Curly's jaw. It took Curly unaware. He staggered backward—right out through the door of the lean-to into the yard.

However, it took him but a split second to regain his balance. "You lowdown, mangy coyote!" he shouted, rushing forward as cowboys poured out of the bunkhouse and Hop Low slid out through the back door of the house.

The cowboys massed at the foot of the bunkhouse steps. But the aged Chinese circled, unnoticed, around the yard until he was only a few feet from Cindy. She was standing, white-faced, in the lean-to doorway.

Gene had been prepared for Curly's rush with a series of rights and lefts that enraged Curly more than they hurt him. Bellowing like an angry bull, he retaliated savagely. His first blow glanced off Gene's shoulder but the second caught Gene on the side of the head and rocked him back on his heels.

A wild, triumphant cry broke from Curly's lips. Lowering his head, he plunged forward. Before Gene could duck, Curly's head rammed into his stomach. He went off-balance, falling backward. As he went, he grabbed Curly's shoulder. Both men landed flat on the ground, Curly on top. Their hats flew from their heads.

Summoning all his strength, Gene twisted his body. Now he was on top. But Curly's thumb against

his Adam's apple forced him to relax his grip. Taking advantage of this, Curly turned on his side and struggled to get a hold on Gene's throat. He was unsuccessful. Gene's arms were a vise around his chest. There was nothing to do but keep rolling and twisting and turning—fighting to break apart those vise-like arms.

Over and over, they rolled. Now Gene was on top, now Curly. Little drops of blood spattered on the grass. The men's heavy breathing was the only sound in the yard for several minutes. Then Cindy could stand it no longer.

"Stop them! Stop them!" she screamed, running from the lean-to doorway.

Not a man moved from the half-circle before the bunkhouse steps. Seeing this, Cindy changed her course. She headed straight for the two figures writhing on the ground.

"Missy stop!" Hop Low suddenly appeared in her path. He spread out his arms to prevent her passing, but made no move to touch her.

"How dare you!" stormed Cindy. "Let me pass, Hop Low! At once! If no man will stop those two, I will!"

"No, missy."

"This is my ranch!" she raged. "I will not have fighting on my ranch! It's horrible!" She was close to hysteria.



Gene and Curly Fought Fiercely

Hop Low shook his head and kept in front of her, his arms still outstretched. "You no want look, missy, you not look. But you no stop fight. Allce same better fight go on. Fight like storm to clear air."

For several seconds, Cindy stared at the wrinkled yellow face. Then she nodded. "You're right, Hop Low. Those two were bound to fight sometime. It might as well be now." She squared her shoulders. "And although I shouldn't stay to watch it, I'm going to."

There was a fleeting look of admiration in the slanting eyes as Hop Low lowered his arms and stepped aside.

Gene and Curly were back on their feet now, circling, feinting, sizing one another up. Both showed the effects of their tussle on the ground. One of Gene's sleeves was hanging to his shirt by only a few threads, and there was a purpling bruise on his left cheek. Curly's shirt was practically in tatters; blood oozed from a cut at the corner of his mouth; his right eye was swelling rapidly.

For a moment, Cindy was afraid she was going to be ill. She gulped, clenched her hands behind her and took a deep breath. Then she bit her lip to hold back a scream as Curly's left lashed out toward Gene's jaw. The blow did not connect. Gene had seen it coming and ducked under it. As he did so, he brought up his own left hand. It bored into Curly's

midriff. Curly doubled up with an involuntary yowl. Quick as a flash, Gene whipped his right to Curly's jaw in a short, hard uppercut. Curly gave a little moan, teetered on his high heels, then crumpled to the ground.

"Ho—ly hat!" exclaimed a tall, bandy-legged cowboy. "What a dog-fight that was!"

Gene walked to the watering trough and plunged his head into it. He straightened to find Manuel Jones dipping out a hatful of water.

"For Curly," said Manuel. Unexpectedly, he grinned. "If you're as handy with your shootin' iron as you are with your fists, mister, I'd sure hate to get you riled at me." His voice was friendly; there was the merest suggestion of a Mexican accent in it.

Gene decided he had misjudged the man. He returned the grin. "I'm not too bad," he said.

Manuel walked away with the dripping hat. Gene's glance swept the yard. Cindy was not in sight. Some of the cowboys were grouped around the fallen Curly; the rest were eyeing Gene with undisguised admiration.

"Velly fine fight."

Gene turned. Hop Low, arms folded, hands lost in his voluminous sleeves, stood a foot or so away grinning at him.

"Missy go house," Hop Low continued. "She say you washee face, come chop-chop."

"I'll be there in two shakes," Gene told him.

By the time the back door had closed on Hop Low, Curly was on his feet. For a moment, he swayed back and forth, slowly shaking his head to clear it. Then he started toward Gene.

The only sound in the yard was the jingling of Curly's spurs. The watching cowboys were like stone images. Even Gene did not move. Not even to wipe away the drops of water trickling down his neck onto his shirt.

All at once, Curly paused. Near his feet lay his sombrero and Gene's Stetson. He stooped, picked up both hats and resumed his walking, carrying a hat in each hand. Stopping squarely in front of Gene, he held out the Stetson.

"After you put this on," he said in a voice husky with fatigue and edged with respect, "I'd like to shake your hand, mister. Sorry I was such a fool not to do it before. Then I'd like to go inside an' beg Miss Weyland's pardon."

Gene slid his hat over his throbbing head and put out his hand. As Curly grasped it, he drawled, "I've got a hunch Miss Weyland doesn't hold with fightin', so I reckon I've got some apologizin' to do, too—" he hesitated a moment, then added with a smile, "*amigo.*"

A twinkle came into the range boss's slate-gray eyes. "I always say a couple o' cowpokes ain't got a

chance o' bein' *compadres* till they've locked horns. Right—Texas Gene?"

Gene nodded, letting his smile broaden. "Right, Curly."

CHAPTER SIX

ABOUT SEVERAL PEOPLE

Motionless in the low rocker, Cindy listened to Gene's and Curly's apologies. Although she was still angry with Curly for his insolence and annoyed with Gene for starting the fight, she found herself wanting to laugh at them. They looked like a pair of small boys who expected to be caned and sent to bed with no supper. She managed to hold her face in solemn lines, however, and when Gene, who had let Curly talk first, finished speaking, she spoke quietly.

"I have always *thought* the West was a wonderful place," she said. "Now, in spite of everything unpleasant that has happened today, I am *sure* of it. I doubt that any place else in the world could produce two men of more sterling character. For it takes character to admit it when you're wrong." Both men reddened. She ignored their embarrassment and continued. "You may forget what I said about discharging you, Curly. However, under the circumstances, I believe it will be to the best interests of all concerned if you remain in your job as range boss."

"That's okay with me, ma'am," said Curly quickly. "I'll be real glad to take orders from Gene."

"You've got it all wrong, Curly." Gene smiled. "I'm not aimin' to be the caporal here, or anywhere else. I'm not an hombre who likes bein' tied down by a heap of responsibility."

Both Cindy and Curly looked surprised.

"Then who—"

Gene did not let Curly finish the question. "Reckon that's up to Miss Cindy."

"Uh, I'll have to think about it," Cindy said hesitantly. "In the meantime, Curly, it might be a good idea for you to beg a piece of steak from Hop Low for that eye of yours. And you might change your shirt, too."

A grin creased Curly's face. It was a slightly lopsided grin due to his aching jaw. "Reckon you're right, ma'am." As he left the room, he glanced back at Gene. "Be seein' you, Gene."

"Right." Gene waited until the door had closed behind Curly, then smiled at Cindy. "You won't be havin' any more trouble with that ranahan, ma'am."

"I hope not." She sounded somewhat absent-minded.

"An' if you don't mind my sayin' so, you did exactly right in not givin' him the foreman's job—even temporarily." Gene seated himself in the easy chair alongside Cindy's rocker. His head was still throbbing although less violently. He would be glad, he thought, when he could head back to town for a bath,

a nap, and clean, untorn clothes. He realized he was hungry, too. It had been a long time since breakfast.

Cindy frowned. "I almost reconsidered after you said you weren't going to take that job. Why did you say that? You told me you would—".

"I didn't say I'd take it," Gene interrupted. "Fact is, I was mighty careful not to say that."

"I heard you with my own ears!"

Gene shook his head. "Sorry to contradict you, ma'am, but what I said was that maybe I could help. Remember?"

After a few seconds' reflection, she nodded. "I guess I misunderstood. But if you won't act as foreman till Tod's well, what am I going to do? Who shall I get? I'd be afraid to put one of our cowboys into the job."

"Curly wouldn't raise any ruckus," said Gene. "He mightn't like it but he'd take it."

Cindy tried to smooth her frown away with the tips of her fingers. But it persisted. "I didn't mean I was afraid of what Curly might do," she explained. "I meant I don't know whether I can trust any of the boys. I have no idea which of them was responsible for stirring up the trouble over the wages. It would be disastrous if I should happen to put that man in as foreman. Why, he'd have Tod and me at his mercy."

"He sure would," Gene agreed. "Your best bet is

to bring somebody in from the outside."

"And how, pray, am I to do that?" she demanded irritably. "I don't know a single soul—"

"I do," Gene interrupted. "An' if you'll hold your horses a couple o' minutes, I'll tell you about him. If you're not interested, I'll be headin' back to town pronto."

Cindy moved to the edge of the rocker. Planting both feet firmly on the floor, she rested her palms on her knees and stared for a long moment into Gene's face. He returned the stare and proved as adept as she at maintaining an unblinking expression.

"You're a strange man, Texas Gene," she said finally. "A very strange man. And although I've known you only an hour or so, I like you. I have confidence in you, too."

"Thank you, ma'am," Gene said politely.

"I have that confidence," Cindy went on, "because my brother trusted you with our money. Therefore, *he* has confidence in you."

"He couldn't help but trust me with it, ma'am," said Gene. "He had to get it out here, an' he wasn't in any shape to do any ridin'."

She made an impatient gesture. "Dr. Foster could have brought it out—or even Tall-Corn Williams. Tall-Corn is an excitable chatterbox but he's honest and dependable, and he'd do anything in the world for Tod." She smiled briefly. "I think he'd do almost

anything for me, too—bless his funny old heart."

A sudden thought struck Gene. "Is this Tall-Corn hombre crowdin' sixty, with a shape like a scarecrow, a scraggly gray mustache an' a voice like a scared puppy?"

Cindy smiled again. "He is—but you forgot the plaid jacket. Where did you meet him?"

Briefly Gene explained his slight contact with the old man in the plaid jacket.

Cindy nodded laughingly. "Tall-Corn's lived in Broken Bow so long, he takes a great deal upon himself. But he means well." She sobered. "To get back to the foreman's job. You spoke as if you had someone in mind for it."

"I have," said Gene. "An hombre named Johnny Trask. He's one o' my best friends, a top-notch cowhand an' so downright honest he wouldn't pull a neckerchief over his face to keep the dust out for fear somebody might mistake him for an outlaw."

Again Cindy laughed. Her laughter was gay, like the ripple of a mountain stream swirling over the rocks.

"You ought to laugh all the time," said Gene impulsively.

The laugh dwindled to an embarrassed giggle. In turn, the giggle became a long sigh as Cindy's eyes clouded once more with the sudden remembrance of her worries.

"This Mr. Trask," she said. "Do you think he would take the job?"

"First rattle out o' the box!" At her perplexed look, Gene explained, "That's Texas talk for 'right away,' ma'am. When I get back to town, I'll send Johnny a telegram. An' I'll bet he'll be on his way within thirty minutes after readin' it."

"How long before he can get here?" Cindy was still worried.

Gene thought a moment. "He's over in El Paso. Reckon he ought to get here by Saturday at the latest."

"Saturday?" she echoed in consternation. "That's five days from now! In the meantime—"

"In the meantime, between Curly an' me, we'll keep the Box-W under control," interrupted Gene. "An' now I'd better tail out for town." He eased to his feet. The movement, slow though it was, set his head to throbbing afresh. His mouth tightened with the pain.

Cindy saw it and bounced out of the rocker. "You're hurt!" she exclaimed.

Gene managed a wry smile. "Curly's got a powerful lot o' drive back o' his fists, ma'am."

Cindy pointed to one of the big couches by the fireplace. "Go over and lie down," she ordered. "I'll get some liniment and—"

"I don't need liniment," Gene broke in. "It's the

inside o' my head that's achin'. It's poundin' like forty hammers. Maybe—maybe it's because I haven't had anything to eat since sunup."

Taking hold of his arm, she practically pulled him to the couch. As he lowered himself on it, she shook her finger at him. "Shame on you for not telling me sooner that you were hungry," she chided. "I'll have Hop Low fix something immediately." She pushed a calico pillow under his head. "You just lie there and relax. After that terrible fight—" She did not finish the sentence. She hurried toward the kitchen, making a little scolding noise with her tongue against her teeth.

Gene stretched out on the couch. It felt mighty good to lie there in the coolness and not even think for several minutes. He closed his eyes. Even a five-minute cat nap would help.

It was ten minutes before Cindy returned. At her first step inside the room, Gene's eyes flew open. His head rose, turtle-fashion, from the calico pillow. Seeing the tray in her hands, he pushed himself to a sitting position.

"Whatever that is, it smells mighty good," he said.

Cindy settled the tray on his lap. "Hop Low makes the best beef stew in the state of Texas," she said, smiling. "There's plenty more of it in the kitchen if that plateful isn't enough. There's more coffee and apple pie, too."



"That Smells Mighty Good," Gene Said

Gene eyed the golden-brown wedge of pie. "Did Hop Low make that pie?"

"No." Cindy's smile revealed dimples. "I did." She started back toward the kitchen. "Excuse me. I want to finish telling Hop Low about Tod." In the doorway she paused. "When I come back, I don't want to find a single crumb left on those dishes."

The food was like a tonic to Gene. After eating every mouthful, he felt so much better that instead of waiting for Cindy to return, he went, tray in hand, to find her. They met in the doorway rather violently. As a result, the tray tipped sidewise and the dishes slid off to the floor where they shattered into a dozen pieces. Before either of them could stoop to pick up these pieces, Hop Low shuffled up.

"Hop Low pick up dish pieces," he singsonged, waving his thin yellow hands as if he were shooing chickens out of a garden patch. "Hop Low got good eyes. Not blind like missy. Not blind like big cowploke."

Gene beat a hasty retreat back to the living-room. Cindy followed, holding her hand over her mouth to keep her laughter from spilling out.

"I've been called a heap o' things in my day," Gene commented, grinning, "but that's the first time I was ever called a 'cowploke.' "

Cindy could not hold her laughter in any longer. She let it ring out. When she could speak through it,

she said, "Wait till you hear him really murder the king's English some day. I've never enjoyed anything so much in all my life. He's a regular one-man comedy."

Gene looked down at his hanging shirt sleeve. "An' I feel like a one-man tragedy in these clothes." He chuckled. "I also feel like a new man, thanks to that food. So if you don't mind, ma'am, I'll head for town now." He saw her open her mouth and guessed at what she was going to say. "No, ma'am!" he said emphatically. "Thanks just the same but I couldn't squeeze into one o' Tod's coats with a shoehorn. An' besides, I'd kind o' like to see how he's gettin' along."

"So would I," said Cindy. "And you shouldn't jump to conclusions. I wasn't going to offer you one of his coats. I was going to suggest your waiting till I changed into something more suitable for riding—and then I'd ride to town with you."

"A good idea," said Gene, taking out his watch. "But I've had experience with womenfolk an' clothes-changin'—so I'll give you five minutes, ma'am. Then I'm leavin'."

Cindy ran for the stairs. "I'll do it in four minutes. And stop calling me 'ma'am.' You make me feel as if I were your grandmother."

She was back in the living-room in four seconds under four minutes. Although she now wore boots, tan riding breeches, and a white tailored shirt, she looked

every bit as feminine as she had in the blue dress.

She glimpsed the admiration in Gene's eyes. "You like?" she said, pirouetting slowly.

Gene put his watch back in his pocket. "I like," he said flatly. "Let's go."

Curly, now clean-shirted, was sitting by the kitchen table holding a piece of raw beef over his injured eye. He grinned when he saw Cindy's riding costume. "I had a hunch you'd be goin' to town, ma'am," he said. "You oughtta find Ginger, that roan you favor, ready an' waitin'. I told Manuel to throw a saddle on him twenty minutes ago."

Cindy flashed him a smile. "Thank you, Curly. That was very thoughtful." She shifted her smile to Hop Low. "Don't save supper for me, Hop Low. I'll eat in town."

"Me savvy." The old Chinese nodded. "Missy come back, bring boss?"

Cindy looked at Gene. "Do you think Tod will be well enough? We could take the wagon—"

"He'll be better off at Doc's tonight," said Gene, opening the back door. "Wait outside for me, will you, Miss Cindy?"

She started to speak but changed her mind and, with a little shrug, went out into the yard.

Gene waited until she was out of earshot. Then he gave Curly a long, significant look. "Mind answerin' me a couple o' questions, Curly?"

"Nope." Curly's grin robbed the single syllable of any hint of curtness.

"Did you put the boys up to demandin' their wages before roundup?"

Curly flushed shamefacedly. Then shook his head.

"Got any idea who did?"

"Nobody really put 'em up to it." Curly spoke slowly as if choosing his words carefully. "One o' the boys got to talkin' about how bad luck's been hittin' a lot o' the San Juan ranchers lately—an' how maybe the Box-W would get hit next—"

"An' there might not be any roundup," Gene interrupted. "An' in that case there might not be any cash for back wages, so you all had better get yours while you could?"

Curly's shamefacedness grew more pronounced. "Yeah. That's how it happened. An' I'm dawgoned sorry I let myself get talked into actin' so all-fired ornery." He reached into his pants pocket. "Uh, I'd kinda like to give back the dinero I drawed. D'you think Miss Cindy'd take it?"

Gene shrugged. "Talk to her about it tomorrow. Right now—"

From the yard came Cindy's voice. "Gene! What on earth is keeping you?"

"Be right there," Gene called over his shoulder. "Tell me one more thing, Curly. Who was the hombre that started all this talkin' about the bad luck

o' the San Juan ranchers?"

Curly's lips tightened into a straight line. "Hack Hill. He's a born troublemaker. Always gettin' somebody riled up about somethin'. I've got a good mind to tell him to dig out his bedroll an' drift. He's paid up to last night, an' he ain't done a lick o' work today so he's got no more pay com—" He broke off and looked up as, shaking his head, Gene came toward him.

"No, Curly," Gene said softly. "Don't fire him—*yet.* As long as he's on the Box-W, we can keep an eye on him. Once he's pulled stakes—" Gene left the sentence dangling, turned on his heel and hurried to join Cindy.

Quiet filled the kitchen until the drumming of Champion's and Ginger's hoofs had faded into the distance. Then Curly looked at Hop Low and grinned.

"You know, Cookie," he drawled, "I've got a mighty powerful hunch Old Man Binyon ain't gonna be addin' the Box-W to his holdin's."

Hop Low's face was an unreadable yellow mask. He picked up a carving knife and drew its thin, sharp-as-a-razor blade swiftly through the air. The blade made a soft, whining noise. It set Curly's teeth on edge.

"Hop Low got hunch, too," said the Chinese.

Curly shuddered. He knew what Hop Low meant.

And, although he too loathed Ezra Binyon, he hoped the banker's and Hop Low's paths would not cross. Death by knifing wasn't a fitting end for any man, even a vicious scoundrel like Ezra Binyon.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FRIEND OR ENEMY

The western sky was ablaze with vivid sunset colors when Gene and Cindy rode into Broken Bow. Along the tree-shaded street, night shadows were already forming pools of darkness around the doorways and the narrow mouths of the alleys between the buildings. Here and there, windows glowed faintly with lamplight. A gray cat that darted across the street scant inches ahead of Champion's hoofs, and a quartet of horses at the hitchrack in front of the Golden Arrow saloon were the only signs of life. The lilting laughter of a child rang out to mingle with coarser, heavier laughter and the music of an accordion that floated into the evening from the saloon's swinging doors.

As Gene and Cindy pulled up before Dr. Foster's office, the figure of a man materialized from the shadows clustering about the recessed doorway of the adjoining building.

"Howdy, ma'am," it called as it came toward them. "Kinda figgered you'd be showin' up, so I been waitin'. Kinda wanted to talk to you."

Even before he saw the plaid coat, Gene recog-

nized the squeaky voice. It belonged to Tall-Corn Williams. Chuckling, he slid from Champion's back. Two to one, the old fellow had not been more than ten feet from Doc Foster's office all afternoon. "Chatterbox," Cindy had called him. From experience, Gene knew talkativeness and curiosity went hand-in-hand. If they did so in Tall-Corn's case, he decided it might be to his advantage to cultivate the old man.

"How nice to see you again, Tall-Corn," said Cindy warmly. She gave her hand to Gene and slipped easily to the ground.

Tall-Corn swept off his battered hat and bowed awkwardly. "Thet goes fer me, too, ma'am." The round bald spot on the top of his head glowed pinkly as the sunset light touched it briefly.

Cindy ducked under the hitchrack and waited for the old man to come nearer.

"Have you heard how Tod is, Tall-Corn?" she asked as she glanced anxiously toward the doctor's office window.

Tall-Corn nodded. "Doc told me a bit ago he was comin' along fine, gonna be okay. An' 'twon't do you no good to try an' peek inta the office. Doc moved Tod back inta his bedroom. Brung Hettie Inman in to take keer o' him, too. Jest in case you didn't come inta town. I told him you'd be here. I knowed—"

"What did you want to talk to me about?" Cindy interrupted with another glance, a rather impatient

one, at the office window.

Gene had finished tying Ginger; Champion would stand all right. He vaulted the hitchrack as the old man answered Cindy.

"Wa-al," he drawled, shuffling his feet as if he were ill-at-ease. "I know I ain't so young any more, but I reckon I can still spill a rope over a cow. So if'n you need an extry hand out at the Box-W whilst Tod's gittin' over his dose o' lead pizenin'—" He slapped his chest emphatically "Here I be!"

"Tall-Corn Williams!" exclaimed Cindy. "Of all the sweet thoughts! Why, you're an—an old dear!"

The red in Tall-Corn's cheeks was not from the sunset. "Aw, shucks, ma'am!" he mumbled, too confused at the moment to say any more.

"And thanks ever so much for offering," Cindy continued. "But I'm sure we have plenty of men to see us through roundup."

Tall-Corn sighed with relief. "Shore glad to hear that! To tell the truth, ma'am, I was kinda frettin' 'bout what I'd do if'n you took me up on that offer." He nodded toward Gene. "Reckon he's aimin' to give you a hand, huh?"

"If necessary," said Gene before Cindy could speak.

She divided a smile between them. "I understand you two met earlier today."

"Shore did!" Tall-Corn held out his hand. "But



Gene Vaulted the Hitchrack

we ain't shook yet."

Gene slipped off his glove before he shook the proffered hand. "Glad to see you again, Tall-Corn."

"Same here," the old man cackled. "An' thanks fer takin' off yore glove."

A puzzled look came into Cindy's face. "Why do you thank him for doing that?"

"Wal, ma'am, in these parts that means he a'ready feels friendly-like toward me," explained Tall-Corn. "An' dawgoned if'n that ain't the way I aim to keep him." He paused for another cackling laugh. "After the way he stood up to Old Man Binyon today—sot him right back on his heels, too—wal, I shore wanta be on *his* side!"

Gene tensed. So the gaunt man with the evil face and the pale green eyes was Ezra Binyon! The man, who, according to Hugh Crane, held the key to the puzzle he had come to San Juan county to solve—if possible. Perhaps he should have kept quiet, or at least not been so openly antagonistic, until he had learned the other's identity. Well, it was too late now. The damage, if any, was already done. He only hoped he had not made Binyon suspicious of him. Binyon's dislike or even his hatred would not be apt to interfere with his plans, but suspicion—

"Gene!" Cindy's tone was sharp.

Gene looked at her. She was eyeing him with obvious exasperation.

"What's ailin' you?" he asked.

"You are," she replied bluntly. "I asked you twice if you were coming with me to see Tod."

"Sorry, Miss Cindy, I didn't hear you," Gene apologized. "I was mighty busy thinkin'."

Her foot tapped out her impatience on the sidewalk. "Well! Are you coming or not?"

"Not," said Gene. "Not right now, I mean. I'll be in after I send that wire we were talkin' about."

"Very well." Cindy hurried to the office door and disappeared through it.

Gene glanced around somewhat uncertainly. "I suppose there's a telegraph office in town, Tall-Corn?"

"Shore is!" chirped Tall-Corn. He pointed down the street. "Right over yonder. See? Next door to the bank." He turned his half-squinted eyes toward the setting sun. "An' if'n you're aimin' to git yore tellygram outa Broken Bow today, reckon you'd better be hightailin' it over there. Sim Peters—he's the operator—shets up shop as soon as the sun gits outa sight ahind thet ridge. He'll keep it shet, too, till two minnits past seven tomorra mornin'."

"Two minutes past seven?" echoed Gene. "That's a funny time to pick. I wonder why he doesn't make it seven sharp."

Tall-Corn scratched his chin with a gnarled forefinger. "Dawgoned if'n I know. It never struck me

afore. If'n you don't mind me sashayin' over there with you, reckon I'll ask Sim 'bout thet while you're a-writin' out yore tellygram."

"I don't mind at all. Come on." Gene started across the street with long, rapid strides.

Tall-Corn trotted at Gene's side, his tongue wagging unceasingly. "When I come here to Broken Bow," he said, " 'twarn't nothin' but a wide place in the road. Shore has growed consid'able. Reckon there must be close to three hunderd folks a-livin' here now, an' thet ain't countin' them as is out in the county."

"It's a nice clean-lookin' town," said Gene. "An' the trees make it a mighty pretty one, too."

Tall-Corn snorted. "I'd like them trees a heap sight better if'n Old Man Binyon hadn't o' planted 'em."

Gene stopped short in surprise. "You mean Binyon planted these trees?"

"Yup!" replied Tall-Corn, resuming his trot as Gene resumed his striding. "He calc'lates he's got a heap o' somethin' called 'civic pride'—whatever thet is. Me? I call it plain downright hoggishness. He's 'bout the selfishest hombre in Texas an' —"

"What's that got to do with his plantin' these trees?" Gene broke in.

"Oh, he didn't plant 'em," said Tall-Corn. "He *had* 'em planted. Way I see it, he wants the town to

look real slick an' purty when it gits its name changed to 'Binyonville' or somethin' like thet." Noticing Gene's puzzled expression, he went on quickly. "What I'm drivin' at is—Old Man Binyon owns most o' San Juan county now an', one o' these days, he'll be ownin' most o' Broken Bow, too—I reckon. Savvy?"

"Sort o'." Gene smiled, thinking that if there were a more roundabout way of saying anything, Tall-Corn would be sure to use it. "Did he clean up the town, too? Put in these stone sidewalks an' such?"

Tall-Corn shook his head. "Thet's Doc Foster's doin'. Doc's shore sot on havin' things slicked up." He laughed shrilly. "Dawgoned if'n he ain't even got *me* washin' ahind my ears."

Gene chuckled. "I hope I get to know Doc while I'm here. He sounds like a first-rate hombre."

They were across the street now, skirting the quartet of horses tied in front of the Golden Arrow saloon.

"He shore is!" declared Tall-Corn. "Techy as a teased snake till he knows you. Then he'd go through anything fer you. Too bad he cain't clean up this whisky mill." He gestured at the saloon doors they were passing.

After they had passed it, Gene took a deep breath to get the saloon stench out of his nostrils. He gave Tall-Corn a slyly teasing look. "I'd never take you for a teetotaler, Tall-Corn."

"I ain't one," Tall-Corn stated emphatically. "But I'm kinda choosey where I do my drinkin'. An' since I found out what a lowdown, ornery polecat Mel Hodge is, I ain't been in his place—" he chuckled a little sheepishly— "exceptin', o' course, a few times when my jug run dry an' Jess Mason's store was closed."

"Mel Hodge runs the Golden Arrow?" asked Gene, more to make the answer Tall-Corn seemed to expect than because he was interested.

"Yup! An'—" Tall-Corn stopped short, eyed the building they were now passing and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Wait'll we git past here. I ain't hankerin' fer nobody to hear."

Gene glanced at the building. On its broad window were the words: BANK OF BROKEN BOW—EZRA L. BINYON, PRESIDENT. He grinned at his companion. "Why, that bank's shut up tight, Tall-Corn. Who'd hear you? The walls?"

"Could be." Tall-Corn shrugged. He waited until they reached the door of the telegraph office, then he grabbed Gene's arm. "Now what was that you asked me 'bout Mel Hodge?"

Gene glanced into the telegraph office, lighted by the sunset pouring through its back windows. He could see a man wearing a green eyeshade bent over a desk. Apparently Sim Peters would not close up for several minutes.

"I asked you if Mel Hodge ran the Golden Arrow?" he said, impatiently shaking off Tall-Corn's hand. "And you said 'yes.' " He reached for the doorknob.

Tall-Corn closed his hand over Gene's. "Jes a minnit, Texas Gene," he said. "I had somethin' else to say. Somethin' kinda important. Leastways, I've got a hunch you'll think it is."

Something in his tone kept Gene from turning the knob. "Let's hear it," he said.

"I was gonna say," Tall-Corn kept his voice down, "thet Mel Hodge runs the Golden Arrer an' Ezra Binyon runs Mel Hodge! So if'n you happen inta the saloon—jest to nose around—wal—"

Their eyes met. And Gene repressed a gasp of amazement. Tall-Corn's eyes were not blurry and half-squinted now. They were keen and piercing and deadly serious.

"You savvy, Texas Gene?"

"No!" snapped Gene. "An' what's the big idea o' —"

Tall-Corn shook his head. The movement was almost imperceptible. The blurry look came back into his eyes. "Better be gittin' inside," he said, releasing Gene's hand. "Thet tellygram you wanta send might be dawgoned important, too."

As Gene opened the door, Tall-Corn pushed past him and headed straight across the room to the man

in the green eyeshade.

"Evenin', Sim," he shouted. "I got somethin' to ask you. Why in thunderation—"

Gene did not hear the rest of Tall-Corn's words nor Sim's reply. He was standing at the short, chest-high counter, a pencil in his hand, a telegraph blank in front of him. But he was not writing. He was remembering a few remarks Hugh Crane had made.

"I can't go to Broken Bow myself, Gene," Hugh had told him during the conference in the El Paso office, "because too many folks up there know me. You see, I've got an uncle in that neck of the woods. I visited him quite regularly up to a few years ago."

Gene glanced toward Tall-Corn stooped in earnest conversation with Sim Peters. At that moment the old man straightened and came toward Gene.

"Sim says he opens up at seven-two in the mornin's," he chortled, " 'cause he leaves his house at seven an' it takes him two minnits to git over here an' unlock the door. Don't make sense to me but he thinks it does." He glanced at the big wall clock and, quickening his pace, passed Gene and went on toward the street door. "Land sakes! Suppertime! I'll shore catch what-for if'n I don't git a move on. Carrie Lovell don't like her boarders bein' late. See you 'round, Texas Gene!"

Gene frowned after the figure scurrying away down the street. Could Tall-Corn possibly be Hugh

Crane's uncle? Or was he a spy in the pay of Ezra Binyon? A spy whose assignment was to find out who "Texas Gene" was and what he was doing in the town of Broken Bow!

CHAPTER EIGHT

THREE FRIENDS

There were numerous lamplit windows along the street when Gene once more headed for Dr. Foster's. While he had been busy in the telegraph office, the brief twilight characteristic of the plains had come and gone, leaving a moonless darkness. He grinned, remembering Sim Peters. Sim had been forced to light the office lamp—a fact that had annoyed him almost as much as his being detained past his regular closing time.

Sim had at first refused to send the second message Gene had written while the key clicked out the one to Johnny Trask. When Gene had held the blank out to Sim, the latter had shaken his head and gestured at the rear window.

"Sun's down, mister," Sim had snapped. "This office is closed."

"Not as long as you're here an' I'm here," Gene had said unsmilingly.

Sim had given the key a final jiggle and started to rise from his chair. "I said it was closed, mister."

"An' I said it wasn't," Gene contradicted laying his six-gun on the counter but keeping his fingers

closed around the butt.

With a gulp, Sim had rescated himself. He had licked his lips, gulped again and stammered, "R-Reckon you're right, m-mister. This office is *sure* open! Uh—hand me that other message. I—I'll get it off pronto."

Gene had waited until the key had finished clicking out the second message. Then, holstering his gun, he had grinned widely. "How much do I owe you?"

"T-Two bucks." Sim had still been nervous although the gun had vanished.

Gene had laid three silver dollars on the counter. "The extra one's for workin' overtime." He had chuckled.

Sim's nervousness had disappeared in a twinkling. He had bounced from his chair to snatch up the coins as if afraid Gene might change his mind and take them back. "Thanks, mister!" he had exclaimed. "I'll be right glad to oblige any time."

"I'll remember that," Gene had called back as he headed into the street.

Passing the Golden Arrow, he wondered if Mel Hodge—or Ezra Binyon—would hear about him pulling his gun on Sim. He rather hoped the operator would spread the story around. If he were considered a "tough guy," any suspicion Binyon had about him might diminish, might even disappear. He chuckled softly. If Sim Peters had only known he had never

been in *less* danger of being shot!

He cut across the street, half-expecting Tall-Corn to hail him. Tall-Corn, he thought, presented a real puzzle. Was the old man on the level? Or was he in Binyon's pay? Whichever he might be, Gene was glad the old fellow had not lingered while he wrote out the telegrams. Tall-Corn might have gotten a peek at their contents. Not that it would have mattered so much if he had seen the one to Johnny Trask. It had been straightforward—an offer to take over the foreman's job on the Box-W on a temporary basis with the possibility of said job becoming permanent. But the second message—the one addressed to Flapjack Hobbs—would certainly have aroused Tall-Corn's curiosity. Had he read it, he might have talked about its contents and thus spoiled a plan Gene was formulating. This wire had read:

> IF YOU'RE GOOD AT PEDDLING SUSPENDERS, BELTS, KNICKKNACKS AND WHATNOTS, HEAD JOCKO IN THIS DIRECTION. . . . A.G.

It might take Flapjack a little while to figure out that "A.G." were Gene Autry's initials hindside-to. But Flapjack was plenty smart. He would figure it out eventually. And when he did, Gene knew he and his burro would be rattling their hocks toward Brok-

en Bow. Flapjack was a dyed-in-the-wool prospector —but he enjoyed "deteckatin'," too. He wouldn't be apt to pass up a chance to work on a case with Gene. He never had, not in all the months Gene had known him.

Dr. Foster's office was dark behind the drawn window blind. Gene rapped on the door. After a moment went by with no sound from beyond the door, Gene rapped again, loudly. This brought results. Within fifteen seconds, he heard quick footsteps approaching and saw a faint glow back of the window blind. Then the door flew open to disclose Dr. Foster's short, stocky figure. Behind the light from the pewter lamp he held, the doctor was frowning with anger and uncertainty.

"Bullets and bobcats!" he snapped. "Don't you know any better than to bang like that when there's an ill man—" Recognizing Gene, he broke off. "Oh! It's *you!*"

Gene nodded. "Evenin', Doc—uh, I mean Doctor Foster. I came to—"

"I know why you're here," Dr. Foster interrupted. He stepped back. "Come in. Tod's been waiting rather impatiently to see you." A twinkle glimmered in his piercing black eyes. "So has his sister." Reaching past Gene, he pushed the door closed. "To tell the truth, Cindy hasn't talked about much of anything but you since she arrived—" He paused for a long

but quick breath, then added, "Mr. Autry."

Gene stiffened with sudden anger. "She told you?"

Dr. Foster shook his head. "I knew this afternoon. Not when I first saw you. I didn't recognize you until later, when you were talking to the sheriff."

"I don't recall ever meetin' you before." Gene frowned.

"You haven't," said Dr. Foster. "I was in El Paso a couple of years ago. You were pointed out to me."

Gene relaxed a little. "Did you tell Sheriff Garey?"

"No. And I won't tell him—or anybody else," the doctor assured him. "From what I know of you, you must have a mighty good reason for using an alias. I wouldn't do anything to—uh—upset your applecart."

"Thanks, Doctor."

Again the twinkle glimmered in Foster's eyes. "You can call me 'Doc,' Mr. Autry. I don't object to nicknames when *friends* use them. I hope you don't object to me calling you 'friend' on such short acquaintance. After what you did for Tod and Cindy today, I'm sure we'll be friends."

"So am I," said Gene putting out his hand. As the doctor shook it, he went on. "An' not just because of Tod and Cindy." He smiled. "I reckon you'd better keep on callin' me just plain 'Gene' instead o' that 'Mr. Autry.' I'm up here on kind o' secret business." He chuckled again. "But at the rate folks are findin' out who I am, I'm afraid neither I nor my business



"I'm Sure We'll Be Friends, Mr. Autry."

will be secret very long."

The doctor looked somewhat concerned. "Has somebody guessed?"

"No," replied Gene. "The Weylands know. I told them."

Foster smiled broadly. "You can trust those two. They're all wool and a yard wide."

"If I hadn't been sure o' that, I'd have kept my mouth shut," said Gene. "An' speakin' o' the Weylands, how's chances for lookin' in on Tod? I promise not to tire him."

Dr. Foster started toward the rear door of the office. "Of course, you may see him. He's much better, and mighty anxious to see you and thank you for taming Curly Ransome. Cindy told us all about it." He waited for Gene to join him before continuing. "That must have been quite a fracas. I wish I could have seen it."

"If you stick around Broken Bow, Doc," Gene said slowly, "I've got a powerful hunch you'll get a chance to see a fight that'll top Curly's an' mine."

Dr. Foster's smile was a very wise smile. "I wouldn't doubt that, Gene. I wouldn't doubt it at all."

Without another word, the physician led the way across a comfortably furnished living-room to the door of a fairly large bedroom pleasant with lamplight. On the bedroom's threshold, he paused to send

his smile toward the bed and its pale-faced occupant.

"Ready for some more company, young man?" he called cheerily.

"Is it—" Tod began. Then he saw Gene's face above the doctor's shoulder and his own face colored with pleased excitement. "Gene! Golly, I'm certainly glad to see you!"

"Same here." Gene grinned.

"And as Tall-Corn Williams would say," Cindy laughed from her perch on the foot of the bed, " 'Thet goes fer me, too.' "

Gene's glance traveled from Tod to Cindy to Dr. Foster and back to the youth in the bed. His grin widened. "It sure is funny," he said. "When I blew in to Broken Bow today, I didn't have a friend in San Juan county. An' now, I've got *three* o' them."

A little breeze wandering through the open window by the side of the bed picked up his voice and carried it out through another open window across the room. This latter window looked out into an alley black with shadows. One of the shadows stirred noiselessly as gay laughter followed Gene's words. Then it moved, still without noise, away from the big rain barrel back of which it had been crouching and stole away down the alley. Had any of the four people in the bedroom glanced out the alley window at that particular moment, they would have recognized the scarecrow-like silhouette of Tall-Corn Williams.

"Humph!" Tall-Corn was murmuring to himself. "If'n I ain't mistaken, you're gonna need a heap more'n three friends in this town afore long, Mr. Texas Gene."

CHAPTER NINE

A FIENDISH SCHEME

Dr. Foster let Gene and Tod visit for fifteen minutes. Then, noticing that white fatigue lines were appearing around his patient's mouth, he said, "I'm sorry to cut this visit short but I think Tod's had about all the excitement he can stand for one day."

"But, Doc," Tod protested, "it isn't six o'clock yet."

"Sick people don't live by clocks," said Dr. Foster. "It's high time you were going to sleep. Unless you get plenty of rest, you won't stand a chance of going home tomorrow."

Gene and Cindy both rose to their feet.

"I'll tuck Tod in for the night," said Cindy. She moved slowly up the side of the bed. The look she gave Gene was a pleading one. "Please don't leave, Gene, until I've had a chance to talk to you some more."

Gene smiled at her. "I won't." He shifted the smile to Tod. "Sleep well, young fellow."

Tod returned the smile. "Don't worry, Gene. I've got an idea I'll sleep better tonight, gunshot wound and all, than I've slept in many a moon. What with

Curly calmed down and a new foreman headed this way—or he will be soon—I haven't got a worry in the world." He reached for Cindy's hand and clasped it. "You'll stay here tonight, won't you, Sis?"

Dr. Foster answered the question. "Naturally! She can have the living-room couch. I'll bunk in the office." He headed out of the room.

"See you tomorrow," said Gene with a wave toward the bed.

Gene closed the bedroom door behind him and crossed the living-room to join Dr. Foster by the round center table. The room was filled with appetizing odors. They were seeping around a half-open door that led, obviously, to the kitchen. Involuntarily Gene's nose wrinkled hungrily as he sorted out the odors. Coffee, frying onions, cinnamon—

"Smells mighty good," he said before he thought how the words would sound.

"Mrs. Inman's cooking always smells good." Foster smiled. "Won't you stay and enjoy some of it with me?"

Gene reddened with embarrassment. "I wasn't fishin' for an invitation, Doc."

Foster nodded. "I know. But I was going to ask you as soon as Cindy joined us. I want her to stay, too." A rather shy look came over his round face. "You see, Gene, it's only on very rare occasions that I can invite guests for a meal. Being a bachelor, I

make no pretense at housekeeping. I usually take my meals at Carrie Lovell's boarding-house, or browbeat a meal out of the relatives of some patient I'm calling on at mealtime. But tonight I'm in luck. Although I told Mrs. Inman she could go home when Cindy arrived, she insisted upon staying and cooking up what she calls 'a mess o' vittles.' " He lost the shy look in a broad smile. "But don't let that scare you. I've eaten her cooking before so I can promise you a mighty tasty meal. How about it?"

"Thanks, Doc, I'd like to stay but—" With a grimace, Gene indicated his torn shirt sleeve. "I've been so all-fired busy since I came back to town, I clean forgot I was comin' apart at the seams. If those 'vittles' could wait till I hunt up a coat that's all in one piece—"

"I'm sure they can," declared Foster starting for the kitchen. "But I'll ask Mrs. Inman anyway."

He poked his head into the kitchen. Gene did not hear what he said but he heard Mrs. Inman's answer. It was given in a high-pitched nasal twang that fairly echoed through the room.

"It can wait jest fifteen minutes an' no more!" she said. "If that's long enough—"

"It is!" Dr. Foster closed the kitchen door and came back toward Gene. "You heard?"

Gene nodded. "Do you suppose the store is still open?" He looked a little worried.

"Goats, gophers, and grubstakes!" Foster bustled to the couch and picked up a dusty black hat lying there. "What difference does that make? Jess Mason lives on the premises." He linked his arm in Gene's. "I'll make him open up if he's closed." Suddenly he halted to shout toward the bedroom. "We'll be right back, Cindy. Going to find Gene a new coat."

The store was not closed. Jess Mason, a kind-faced man with light brown mutton-chop whiskers, was straightening his bolts of calico and gingham and alpaca. He acknowledged Foster's introduction of "Texas Gene" with a genial smile that became even more cordial when he learned the reason for their call. It was not every day in the week he sold an expensive item like a coat. He gave Gene a long, estimating look, then walked to a rack at the back of the store and returned, a moment later, with a light tan coat that proved a perfect fit.

"I'll take it," said Gene, reaching for his money. "An' I'll be around tomorrow for a couple more things. When I headed this way, I didn't figure on—well, on a lot o' things."

Mason looked interested but not overly curious. "Goin' to be in Broken Bow long?"

"That depends," Gene hedged.

Dr. Foster gave a significant chuckle. "He met Cindy Weyland this afternoon, Jess."

The storekeeper's whiskers waggled furiously with

the heartiness of his laughter. "If I was twenty years younger," he chortled, "an' wasn't already hitched, I'd give you some powerful competition, Texas Gene —an' no mistake."

His laughter followed them out the door and down the street.

"I hope you didn't mind my bringing Cindy into the conversation, Gene," said Dr. Foster. "I decided it was the only safe, and quick, way to stop Jess from asking questions. Questions you might not feel like answering."

Gene's face grew solemn. "I'm afraid you're goin' to have to think up a lot o' ways to stop folks from askin' questions, Doc. Especially when they find out you an' I have gotten sort o' friendly. I sure hope they won't pester you *too* much."

"Sand, smoke, and sidewinders!" boomed Foster. "I'm used to being pestered. I'll wager there are more nosynitwits to the square mile around here than any place else in the United States. They pry into my personal affairs and put me through regular inquisitions about my patients. And, believe me," he chuckled, "some of the answers I give them set them back on their heels so hard they leave dents in the sidewalk."

All during supper, to which Gene did ample justice, he tried to figure out a way to bring Ezra Binyon's name into the conversation without making a

point of it. From one of the others—Cindy, the doctor, or Mrs. Inman, who looked exactly like she sounded—he should be able to learn a great deal about the banker. And what he might learn, he knew could be depended upon. There would be no uncertainty, no suspicion of untruths, as in Tall-Corn's case. It was not until Mrs. Inman had excused herself to "redd up" the dishes and he, Cindy, and the doctor were dawdling over second cups of delicious coffee that the banker's name came up. Its introduction was unexpected and Gene did not make it.

Cindy was responsible. She had abstractedly been stirring the sugar round and round in her cup while Dr. Foster described a recent hunting trip he had taken. When he finished the story, she stopped stirring and looked up, frowning.

"I've been thinking," she said slowly, "and I wonder, all things considered, if we shouldn't accept Mr. Binyon's offer."

"What!" Dr. Foster fairly bounced up and down in his chair. "Sell the Box-W? You're completely crazy! I—"

Cindy interrupted. "Mr. Binyon didn't offer to buy the ranch, Doctor. He offered to take a mortgage on it. But Tod wouldn't even discuss the matter. However, now that we're practically out of cash —well, I wonder."

"Humph!" snorted the doctor, purpling with in-



"You're Completely Crazy," Roared Dr. Foster

dignation. "The idea of even wondering about it, Cindy Weyland! I thought you had better sense."

Cindy colored. "To me, it doesn't make sense to struggle along, penniless until after roundup, when Mr. Binyon would be glad to give us five thousand dollars now in exchange for a mortgage."

"Mortgage, my sainted Aunt Cissy!" Dr. Foster's fist banged the table so forcefully the coffee cups almost jiggled out of their saucers. "You'd be selling him the Box-W for that five thousand—and you know it!"

"I don't know any such thing," Cindy contradicted, but her voice was slightly unsteady with uncertainty.

The veins in the doctor's forehead were like tiny knotted ropes. He looked as if he were about to explode with irritability. "Rustlers, renegades, and road agents!" he shouted. "If you don't know it, you're the only person in San Juan county who doesn't!"

Cindy's lip quivered. "You don't need to shout at me like that, Doctor. I know what they say about Mr. Binyon. But I'm so worried and upset and—" She put her head down and covered her face with her hands.

Instantly Foster's irascibility vanished. Bobbing up from his chair, he rounded the table to put a gentle hand on Cindy's shoulder.

"Easy, Cindy," he soothed. "Tears never solved a problem."

"I'm not crying," said Cindy for the second time in less than twelve hours. "I'm trying to keep from it." She raised her head to look at Gene; there was the faintest suggestion of a smile at the corners of her mouth. "Honestly, Gene, I don't spend all my time doing this. But today—" She did not finish the sentence, but she did not re-cover her face either.

Gene nodded with understanding. "This has been a mighty upsettin' day," he said.

"Indeed it has." Dr. Foster returned to his chair. "But as long as Ezra Binyon is above ground, every day in San Juan county is an upsetting one—and many of them are tragic." His black eyes probed Gene's face. "I suppose you're wondering what this is all about, Gene?"

"I *am* a mite curious," Gene admitted. "I don't savvy why a doctor, whose business is savin' lives, talks like he wishes one o' the town's upstandin' citizens would take the big jump."

The physician drained his coffee cup before he replied. "I don't exactly wish for Ezra Binyon's death, Gene," he said slowly. "But in all honesty I must admit it might put an end to a great deal of misery and unhappiness."

"You don't sound too sure about *him* bein' responsible for this misery an' unhappiness," said Gene.

"I'm not," Dr. Foster barked. "If I were, I'd hand him over to Tom Garey so fast he wouldn't have time to cast a shadow while we were heading down the street to the jail!"

Gene frowned; Doc was becoming almost as roundabout a talker as Tall-Corn. "Now I'm not only curious, I'm downright confused," he declared. "Suppose you start at the beginnin' an' tell me about Binyon an' why he's so all-fired unpopular with you."

Cindy leaned forward. "I'll tell you in a very few words. Every single rancher who has given Mr. Binyon a mortgage on his ranch has lost that ranch by foreclosure."

"Not every rancher," corrected Dr. Foster. "There are a few who only took out mortgages recently. So far, they're still safe."

Gene traced the rim of his cup with a thoughtful forefinger. He wanted to go on asking questions but he was not ready yet to tip his hand. "This powwow is gettin' more an' more confusin'," he said finally. "Seems to me at least one rancher ought to have made enough money to meet his payments an'—"

Dr. Foster made a silencing gesture. "Wait, Gene. Let me give you the whole picture. Then you'll understand." He flipped a long, thin cigar from his coat pocket and held it out to Gene. "Perhaps you'd like to light up before I begin. It's rather a long story."

Gene shook his head. "Thanks just the same, Doc,

but I don't smoke."

"Neither do I." Cindy smiled.

"But you don't mind my doing it, do you?" Dr. Foster included both of them in the question.

"I don't," said Gene.

"Neither do I," Cindy repeated. She propped her elbows on the table and nestled her chin in her palms. "Tod is a confirmed pipe smoker. So was my father." A wistful look came into her dark, eloquent eyes. "Mother used to say that ashes on the carpet kept the moths out and Daddy home."

"A very sound bit of reasoning," declared Dr. Foster. He concentrated on lighting the cigar and, when it was going to his satisfaction, continued. "Getting back to Binyon. He practically founded Broken Bow. It was only a stage depot when he came here with a good-sized bank roll and a lot of determination. Where he had acquired his money, I don't know. And it really doesn't matter. He had it and he used it to build up the town and the county. For half a dozen years, he was a good solid citizen. He organized the Ranchers' Cooperative Association and the Broken Bow Civic Improvement Society. He built most of the buildings on Main Street and built them well, too. And when he rented them, he put a clause in the leases that they had to be painted every year. He donated the land and two thousand cash so folks could build the Methodist Church. He made loans, inter-

est-free, to anybody who needed money for an emergency." The doctor's face began to harden. "Then about two years ago, he began to change. He grew hard and cold and cruel. Folks hated to do business with him but by that time he'd grown so rich and powerful, they couldn't help themselves." He paused for a long, drawn-out sigh.

Gene took advantage of the pause to say, "I wonder what happened to make him change all of a sudden like that?"

"Plenty of us have wondered the same thing," said Dr. Foster. "Up to now, we haven't found any answer." He took a long puff on the cigar and, as the smoke swirled ceilingward, went on. "It was last year that Binyon began to really bear down on the ranchers."

"In what way?" asked Gene.

Dr. Foster reflected a moment. "The best way to answer that, Gene, is to tell you about Sam Hendricks. Sam's story is a typical one. With a few variations, it is the story of all the ranchers whose holdings Binyon has—uh—*acquired.*" Again he paused for a long pull at the cigar.

Gene glanced at Cindy. She was tense and some emotion he could not identify was smoldering in her eyes.

"Sam needed cash," Dr. Foster resumed, "so he gave Binyon a five-thousand-dollar mortgage on his

spread. Two weeks later, Sam's big barn burned. A month after that, half of his herd died. Some devil had sprinkled poison on the salt licks. The following week, rustlers got away with most of the rest of the herd. Sam couldn't meet his mortgage payments, not even the interest." Foster's eyes were like hard bits of black marble. "Binyon collected the insurance, then foreclosed. Sam shot himself and his wife. They didn't have any children."

The living-room was very quiet for at least three minutes after the doctor stopped speaking. But the silence was tense and explosive.

Then Cindy said softly, haltingly, "I hadn't realized—I didn't know—" She straightened, squaring her shoulders. "And you needn't worry about that evil man getting hold of the Box-W, Doctor Foster. If Tod and I starve, we will never give him a mortgage on our ranch! And if he ever dares to set foot on our ranch again, I'll personally order the boys to throw him off—if they have to use guns to carry that order out!"

Dr. Foster flashed her a glance of admiration and approval. "Spoken like a true Texan, Cindy." When she thanked him with a look, he turned to Gene. "Well, Gene, any questions?"

"Yes," said Gene. "You mentioned Binyon collectin' insurance. What insurance?"

"Before Binyon takes a mortgage on a ranch," the

doctor explained, "he insists upon the rancher taking out an insurance policy covering everything on the place—cattle, buildings, grain and so forth. In this policy, Binyon is always named beneficiary, if that's what it's called when death isn't involved." He hesitated but Gene said nothing so, after a dry, mirthless laugh, he went on. "So you see, the old devil wins all ways around. When disaster strikes, he collects the insurance. When the rancher can't pay, he grabs the ranch." The hand without the cigar doubled into a fist. The fist beat softly against the edge of the table as he added, "It's a fiendish, diabolical scheme! And only a villain like Binyon could think of it."

Gene's own fingers curled tightly into his palms. "Right, Doc," he said quietly. "An' although Binyon probably figured it out by himself, I'll bet he isn't carryin' it out alone. He couldn't rustle cattle or burn barns by himself. He must have a gang o' owlhoots workin' for him."

Dr. Foster's face was inscrutable. "I didn't say Binyon caused the disasters that hit his mortgagees, Gene."

"You didn't have to!" Gene drawled the words but his listeners could not mistake the fury seething inside him. "But, sure as shootin', he's back o' them." He eased up out of the chair, his arms rigid at his sides. "An', sure as shootin', somebody's got to stop him pronto."

Neither Cindy nor Dr. Foster answered that remark. By the expressions on their faces, Gene realized they both knew who that "somebody" was. He also realized that neither of them would ever tell, not unless he gave them permission.

CHAPTER TEN

PARTNERS IN CRIME

The knocking was very loud. It echoed through the large, high-ceilinged room and pulled Ezra Binyon to his feet as if he were a puppet at the end of a suddenly tweaked string. He had been taking his usual early-evening nap in the big armchair and had awakened so abruptly, he was momentarily confused. What had roused him? A dog howling? No, it had been a different kind of sound, a thumping. But the house was empty except for himself. It was tightly locked, too. No one could possibly have forced an entrance while he was asleep. He had just concluded he must have been dreaming when the knocking came again.

He tensed. Three short raps in quick succession; a pause; then three more raps, spaced farther apart. He moved rapidly across the room, a dull redness replacing his usual pallor. When he opened the door, the livid scar at his mouth corner was glowing red as it always did when he was angered.

"Hodge! You fool!" he barked. "Didn't I tell you to stay away from my house? It's too blamed risky. If people get the idea we're *personal* friends, and get

curious, they might start nosing around into your past and—"

"Aw, dry up!" Mel Hodge, a lean and long-limbed man, elbowed Binyon aside and strode on into the room. "An' don't keep *me* roostin' on your doorstep! I reckon I've got a right to call on my banker any time I take a notion. An' speakin' o' *my* past, yours isn't anything to crow about—or have you forgotten?"

"I never forget anything!" Binyon slammed the door, shot the big bolt across its stoutness and turned angry eyes on the other man, now standing by the table. "And if you were so blamed anxious to see me tonight, the least you could have done was come to the back door!" he added, snappishly.

Hodge's eyes narrowed. "Any time I come to your back door, Binyon, it'll be because the law's got the front door covered." He began to slip off his black gauntlet gloves with lazy, almost feline, movements.

Binyon lowered himself into the big chair. His long bony fingers clutched the chair's arms so tightly the knuckles whitened. The livid scar continued to glow redly in his gaunt pale face as he stared up into Hodge's face. In spite of his anger, Binyon appraised Mel Hodge. He had high cheekbones, straight black hair, thin lips and smooth skin with a reddish cast to its sun-given brownness. Hodge's eyes were oddly-colored, yellowish with flecks of brown. As the lamp-light struck them, they looked like cat's eyes.

Binyon fought down an impulse to shiver. He disliked cats intensely. He disliked Mel Hodge, too, but Hodge was useful—even necessary—to him. Consequently, he tried not to show his dislike.

The grandfather's clock in the corner ticked away another minute. Binyon continued to stare up at the tall man until the latter shifted his glance. Then sly satisfaction curled Binyon's lips. His pale green eyes grew less hard. The livid mouth scar began to lose some of its redness. In another clash of wills, he had won. The victory was sweet; he could taste it on his lips like the leftover taste from a sugarplum. He decided he could afford to be generous.

"Help yourself to a drink, Hodge." He gestured at a small side table on which stood a bottle and three glasses.

"Thanks. I need it," said Hodge. "You sure live like a swell, Binyon," he said. "It always makes me feel like a dude to drink outa one o' these fancy glasses." He filled a goblet and then drained it in a single gulp.

Binyon gave one of his dry, cackling laughs. "Maybe so," he rasped, "but I notice that isn't keeping you from enjoying it."

Hodge refilled the goblet, started for the near-by couch, then hesitated. "Maybe you'd like a drink tonight, Binyon? I'll be real glad to pour you one."

"You know I never touch the stuff," Binyon cross-

ly reminded him. "I only keep it around for visitors. Fortunately, I don't have many of them—any more—so a bottle lasts me a long time."

There was a strange look in Hodge's yellow eyes. "Sometimes I get loco notions, Binyon." His voice was strange, too; it seemed to have both a laugh and a sneer behind it. "I get to thinkin' maybe you'd be a lot easier to get along with if you had company once in a while." He sat down on the couch and stretched his long legs out full length.

Binyon made a tent of his fingers. He did not look at Hodge as he spoke. "Did you come here tonight to talk about my disposition?"

"No." Hodge made his tone as evenly colorless as the banker's had been. "About the boys."

Binyon kept on looking at his fingers. "Yes?" was all he said.

Hodge half emptied the goblet before answering. "The boys're gettin' restless. They want action."

"They'll get action when I'm ready—and not before!"

"Wrong, Binyon. They'll get action pronto—or else!" There was no mistaking the threat in Hodge's voice.

Now Binyon turned toward the couch. His pale green eyes glittered like bits of glacial ice in bright sunshine. "Just what does that mean?"

"You oughtta know," said Hodge. He waited

briefly. Then, when Binyon made no comment, he went on. "You oughtta know, too, how ringy a bunch o' long riders can get when they start to run low on cash an'—"

"I tipped them off to a chance to get hold of some money this morning," Binyon interrupted. "And they muffed it!"

Hodge scowled. "I know. An' Sleeper Jackson took a bullet in the shoulder that's going to keep him from bein' any good to us for quite a spell."

"Is that my fault?" snapped Binyon.

Slowly Hodge shook his head. "No. Reckon they can't blame you because they didn't get hold o' Weyland's cash." His jaw tightened. "If that smart-aleck cowpoke hadn't come along when he did an'—" He broke off as he saw Binyon clench his fists. Then he chuckled with remembrance. "Hanged if I didn't forget you'd met that cowpoke! From what I heard, he's as quick on the trigger when it comes to speakin' as when he's throwin' lead."

"You were up at the hide-out today," growled Binyon. "How did you hear? Who—" He could not finish the question; his fury at recollection of Gene's words choked him.

Hodge chuckled again. "Hang it all, Binyon, this Texas Gene's got the whole town on its ears! That's all anybody's talkin' about down at the Golden Arrow." He paused to drain the goblet, eyeing Binyon



Binyon Clenched His Fists in Fury

slyly over its rim. "He must be quite an hombre. Reckon I'll have to see about makin' his acquaintance."

The banker swallowed convulsively. His fists banged on the chair arms. "You're blasted right you'll make his acquaintance—at the other end of your six-gun!"

Hodge twirled the goblet in his sinewy fingers. "Not me, Binyon, not me. I'm not a hired gunny. I'll put one o' the boys on the job, though."

"None of them could handle this saddle stiff!" barked Binyon. "He's dynamite. Why, this afternoon—out at the Box-W—"

Hodge interrupted. "I heard about that, too. An' I didn't feel too bad about it, either. Curly Ransome's been askin' for somebody to crawl his hump for a long time. He—"

"Never mind Curly Ransome!" Binyon cut in. "I don't give two hoots about him! It's this cowpoke who calls himself Texas Gene I'm interested in. You ought to be interested in him, too, and not from just a friendly or curious standpoint, either."

Hodge tensed. "How come?"

"Because," said Binyon, "unless I'm very much mistaken, he means trouble for us."

Hodge sat bolt upright, feet flat on the floor. "You mean you think he's a John Law?"

"Maybe." Binyon felt a little better. Obviously, he had jarred Hodge out of his complacence about the newcomer. "And maybe he's just a range bum. But whatever he is, I've got an idea we'll be better off if he finds his way to Boot Hill as soon as possible."

Hodge rose to his feet, replaced the goblet on the tray and picked up his gloves. "I'll see about that little thing *muy pronto*. I'll send Eddie Drake—"

"Eddie Drake?" Binyon squealed. "After the way he bungled the Weyland job? You can't send him! I won't have it!"

"Eddie's a topnotch gun-shark," said Hodge, "especially when he's gunnin' for somebody special, an' makes arrangements beforehand. So I'm sendin' him! Savvy?" He stooped slightly and, eyes narrowing, looked straight into the gaunt, parchment-skinned face. "An' savvy this, too, while you're at it, Binyon. If you don't quit gettin' so all-fired uppity with me, you'll be shakin' hands with St. Peter yourself one o' these days."

Inwardly Binyon shrank from the hostile gleam in the yellow eyes. But he held his tone to a coldly unemotional one as he said, "Don't threaten me, Hodge."

"Then don't try to boss *me!*" For the first time Hodge seemed to be on the verge of losing his temper. "I've got as much say-so as you have. We're pardners, remember?"

Binyon nodded. "I could hardly forget *that,*" he replied tartly.

"Or stop regrettin' it, too, I reckon," leered Hodge.

Binyon pushed himself to his feet, using the chair arms as levers. This action forced Hodge to step backward but did not, as Binyon had hoped, make him shift his glance.

Binyon's thoughts raced. Physically he was no match for this tall, lean-limbed man. Mentally? That was a different story. Hodge acted quickly but thought slowly. However, once he got an idea fixed in his mind, nothing short of having his brains blown out would jar it loose. Therefore, if he ever convinced himself Binyon hated him, he might also believe the banker was planning his downfall—which was just what Binyon was planning. In that case, he would—Binyon left that thought incomplete. For a second, he seemed to feel Hodge's bullets ripping into his body. It was a most unpleasant feeling; it sent cold chills up and down his spine.

"I don't regret our partnership," he said slowly. "But I will admit you do get under my skin at times. You're so stubborn and suspicious."

"I've got a right to be suspicious o' you!" snapped Hodge.

Binyon forced a thin smile to his lips. "Nonsense! I've treated you fair and square since you showed up in Broken Bow. I took you into partnership with me.

I helped you round up a mighty slick outfit of gunslingers. I put up the cash for the Golden Arrow—"

"Yeah!" Hodge broke in. "An' why did you do all that? Because I finally caught up with you!"

They were standing almost eye-to-eye now. Gleaming yellow eyes staring into glittering pale green ones. In spite of their physical differences, they resembled one another in an odd, evil sort of way. For a long moment, neither of them moved or spoke. Then, as he had done earlier, Hodge shifted his glance. And as *he* had done earlier, Binyon tasted the sweetness of victory over the other's will. Again, he could afford to be generous.

"Okay, Hodge. Have it your way," he said. "You caught up with me—and I paid off." He knew from the way the other man's jaw went slack, his words had taken Hodge by surprise. He hurried on. "But all that's dead and gone. Suppose we leave it that way. Okay?"

Puzzlement and suspicion mingled in the yellow eyes as their owner nodded. "Okay—but I sure don't savvy."

"It's quite simple," said Binyon. "I'm tired of arguing with you about the past—about prison and what cellmates say to one another—about El Paso and the Territorial Bank holdup—about who's to blame because you didn't get there in time—" He sighed. "All that, as I said, is over and done with. I'm not in-

terested in it any more. I'm only interested in today—and tomorrow. So why talk about bygones? Now, do you understand?"

"No," Hodge said flatly. He began to pull on his gloves. "But maybe I will—after I think about it awhile." He gave the banker a sharp glance. "An' maybe I'll figure out, too, what you're up to with all this soft talk."

Binyon cackled. "There you go—acting suspicious again. Great guns, Hodge, what do I have to do to get you to trust me? To convince you I'm on the level?"

"Well," replied Hodge in the strange voice with the sneer and the laugh behind it, "first, you can fork over some cash for the boys."

The banker nodded. "All right. Drop in at the bank tomorrow, after the mail rider's been through. If I get the insurance check for that fire loss on the Running-R, there'll be a lot of cash for them to split up. If I don't get it, I'll manage to scrape up a little. Okay?"

"Reckon it'll have to be," shrugged Hodge. "But the boys aren't gonna like it too much. An' I won't be responsible for what they do if some real big dinero doesn't come along pronto." He moved leisurely toward the door. "An' don't worry any more about Texas Gene. Eddie'll take care o' that jasper."

Binyon rubbed his palms together. In his harsh

laugh there was both triumph and malice. "I won't, Hodge. I won't worry over a single blasted thing."

Hodge was at the door now. He shot back the bolt, but, before turning the knob, he looked back at the gaunt, stoop-shouldered figure by the table.

"If I were you, Binyon," he said quietly, "I'd worry. Fact is, I'd never stop worryin'—even when I was asleep."

Binyon did not move until the click of the latch told him Hodge had gone. Then he headed for the door. The scar at his mouth was a scarlet gash in the pallor of his face. And his eyes were aflame with hate. But his steps were unsteady with fear and foreboding.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WHERE WAS TEXAS GENE?

It was Saturday. But, as it turned out later, it was not a run-of-the-mill Saturday. For several incidents and conversations occurred in and near Broken Bow on that date that eventually led to what Flapjack Hobbs called "th' ding-danged blowoff."

The first incident, plus two of the conversations, took place early in the morning at the Golden Arrow. The barkeeper, Nat Baird, was busy polishing glasses but, at the same time, keeping his eye on Tall-Corn Williams as the latter pushed a long-handled broom over the unpainted floor. Tall-Corn had been working rapidly. He had swept more than half of the room in less than ten minutes. But Nat noticed that, for the last two minutes, he had been slowing down. The bartender frowned. Funny, the nearer Tall-Corn drew to the closed door of Hodge's office, the slower he pushed the broom. In another minute, he'd be at a standstill, right close to the office door. Maybe close enough to hear what was being said behind it.

"Hey, Tall-Corn!" he yelled suddenly. "Get a move on there!"

Tall-Corn gave a start. "Gosh, Nat," he said ag-

grievedly, "you like to scairt me outa my skin, screechin' at me like that. I'm hurryin' fast as ever I can. An' besides, what's all the rush? You ain't openin' up for twenty more minnits. I heerd Mr. Hodge tell you—"

"I heard him, too," Nat interrupted. "But you've got a lot to do in those twenty minutes, Tall-Corn. Sprinkle fresh sawdust on the floor, wipe off the tables, move the chairs back in place, bring in a bucket o' fresh water an' fill the lamps!" He finished with a loud snicker, not only at the other's flabbergasted expression but at the speed with which the old man was now moving. At each chore Nat had mentioned, the broom had taken on speed. And when Nat stopped speaking, it was moving so rapidly, both it and Tall-Corn seemed to be skating over the floor.

"Dawgone it!" grumbled Tall-Corn. "If'n I didn't need the cash so blamed much, I'd quit. I'm gettin' kinda fed-up with the job anyways."

Nat guffawed. "Why, you ain't been workin' but two days." He squinted at the glass in his hand, blew off a speck of lint and continued. "I was sure surprised the other night when you come in an' asked for the job."

Tall-Corn raised a quizzical eyebrow. "What's so s'prisin' 'bout thet? I heerd the job was open. I come in an' asked for it. Mr. Hodge give it to me."

Nat twirled a fresh glass in his none-too-clean

towel. "Yeah," he chortled. "He gave it to you when he got his breath back."

Tall-Corn swept the pile of debris into a battered dustpan. He stood the broom up in the corner behind the bar and smiled a little sheepishly at the bartender. "Reckon it is kinda discombobbulatin' fer the laziest galoot in Broken Bow to ask fer a job, but I got kinda tired o' folks makin' ree-marks 'bout me never doin' nothin' but jibber-jabberin' an' ketchin' forty winks an'—" He whirled toward the office door from behind which had come an unintelligible cry followed by a loud thump. The thump sounded exactly like a body hitting the floor. For a few seconds, Tall-Corn stared at the door, his Adam's apple bobbing convulsively in his throat, the dustpan shaking a little in his hand. Then he slowly turned to look at the bartender.

Nat was eyeing the closed door, too. Fear was flickering in his close-set eyes. All at once he seemed to realize that Tall-Corn was staring at him. The fear gave way to irritation.

"Well!" he barked. "Are you stuck to the floor? Get movin'!"

"But hadn't we better see—" Tall-Corn made a vague gesture toward the office.

Nat walked down along the bar until he was close to the old man.

"I've been workin' for Mel Hodge ever since he

opened this place nigh onto two years ago," he said. "An' if there's one thing he won't stand for, it's anybody openin' that office door without an invite." He shrugged. "So unless you're real anxious to get yourself a free halo, I wouldn't advise you to touch that doorknob."

Tall-Corn said nothing. He merely tugged at one end of his scraggly mustache and went to empty the dustpan.

Nat walked back up to the center of the bar. While he finished his glass-polishing, he kept sending stealthy glances toward the office door. He knew who was in there with the boss. But he did not know, of course, why Hodge had knocked Eddie Drake down. Eddie was an all-right hombre. It never occurred to him that Eddie might have swung the flooring punch. Where Mel Hodge was concerned, men didn't do that. Hodge never gave them the chance. He wore his guns too low.

In the rear office, Eddie Drake raised his head from the floor and squinted uncertainly up at the tall, lean-limbed figure looming over him. "Yuh hadn't oughtta done that, Mel, when I wasn't lookin'," he said. "Besides, I ain't done nothin' to earn a poke in the jaw."

"No!" Hodge's eyes were yellow slits. "Nothin'! Nothin' but let Texas Gene go on livin'! An' after I told Binyon you were a topnotch gun-shark."

Drake pushed himself to a sitting position. His head was spinning. Hodge packed an awful wallop in his lean fists. "Yuh've seen me throw lead," he said sullenly. "Yuh know if I'm good or not."

Hodge sneered. "Yeah, I know. I know you're good for nothin'!" His right hand darted out, seized Drake by the shoulder, yanked him to his feet.

Drake leaned against the wall, pretending to be more groggy than he was. He needed time to clear his head, to let his hand grow steady. If Hodge *should* go for his gun—

"I told you last Tuesday to get that cowpoke!" Hodge continued angrily. "This is Saturday! An' is Texas Gene in Boot Hill? No! Accordin' to you, he's sittin' over at Doc Foster's, swillin' coffee an' guzzlin' flapjacks." He paused to eye Drake sharply. "By the way, if you've never seen Texas Gene—like you said —how do you know Doc's caller is him?"

" 'Cause I heard Doc call him Gene," Drake explained. "That was after I spotted his horse at the hitchrack an' snuck around back o' Doc's to see—"

"How'd you know the horse?" interrupted Hodge.

"On accounta half a dozen people gave me his description."

"Blast it!" raged Hodge. "If you got close enough to hear Doc an' him talkin', you were close enough to plug him!"

"I already told yuh why I couldn't do that," Drake



"You're Good for Nothin'!" Hodge Sneered

said. "Doc was in the way. Maybe yuh'd liked me to o' gunned Doc down?"

Hodge ignored that question. "I suppose Doc's been in the way o' your shootin' Texas Gene for the last three days," he sneered. His yellow eyes were filled with angry sparks.

"I told yuh about that, too," said Drake with a show of impatience. He was feeling better, getting back his nerve. When he was himself, he wasn't afraid of anybody—even Hodge. "This mornin's the first time I've laid eyes on that bird, b'lieve it or not."

"I'm not doubtin' that," Hodge frowned, suddenly losing his anger in perplexity. "He's sure made himself scarce since Tuesday night. I wonder where in thunder he's been?"

"Search me." Drake shrugged. "He ain't been in town—unless he snuck in after dark. I'm sure o' that! Everybody's been tryin' to get a squint at him an' if he'd o' showed, I'd know about it." He waited for Hodge to nod agreement and, when the tall man did, went on. "An' he ain't been out at the Box-W neither. Hack Hill swears to that."

"I wouldn't believe Hack Hill if he took an oath on a stack o' Bibles," growled Hodge.

Drake looked surprised. "Then what'd yuh hire him for?"

"Because I wanted a spy in the enemy's camp—if you can savvy that lingo."

Drake clamped his teeth together to keep from answering.

"It sure beats me," Hodge went on after a moment, "where that cowpoke could o' gone an' why." Sitting down in the swivel chair at the roll-top desk, he stared thoughtfully into space.

Drake took advantage of being momentarily ignored to rub his aching jaw and move to a splint-bottomed chair opposite the swivel one. For several moments, the office was quiet except for the buzzing of a big blue-bottle fly seeking a way out of the windowpane. Drake rolled a cigarette, watching Hodge closely and wondering what thoughts were going on behind those half-shut yellow eyes.

Hodge finally broke the silence. "I'm changin' my plans about Texas Gene," he said slowly. "Binyon's got a hunch maybe he's a lawman. His goin' away so mysterious-like kinda backs up that hunch. Maybe he went away to talk to some other lawmen. Maybe—" He hesitated briefly and then apparently decided not to pursue that trend of reasoning—at least, not aloud. "So I'm goin' to let Texas Gene go on breathin' till I find out more about him an' where he's been these last three days—an' how much he knows, if anything." The look he gave Drake seemed to be asking for approval.

Unhesitatingly, Drake gave it. "That's smart figurin', boss," he said, thinking that after all there was

no sense holding a grudge. Hodge was a strict boss but he was fair and mighty generous. When there was any loot to be split up, he only took an extra ten per cent for himself as leader.

A thin smile spread across Hodge's face. "Ezra Binyon isn't goin' to think so."

"So what?" Drake grinned. "Yuh can handle him!"

"Reckon I can," Hodge said, "one way or the other." He stood up. "Come along, Eddie. I'm hungry. Let's grab some chuck at the hotel an' then see if we can locate this Texas Gene. I'm gettin' real anxious to come face-to-face with that hombre."

While this conversation was taking place, another one—equally important—was going on in Dr. Foster's living-room.

The doctor had been pleasantly surprised when, an hour earlier, he had opened the front door to find Gene on the threshold. Although curious about Gene's recent activities, he had insisted that all serious conversation wait until after breakfast. Furthermore, he had insisted upon preparing that meal himself.

"I'm a wizard when it comes to throwing together a batch of flapjacks, and I can make almost as good coffee as Hettie Inman," he had declared in reply to Gene's remark that he was "sure narrow at the equator an' how about droppin' over to Carrie Lovell's boarding-house for some chuck." On the way to the

kitchen, Foster had added with a chuckle, "To tell the truth, Gene, if we showed up at Carrie's, we'd both be cross-questioned deaf, dumb, and blind. And we'd be so busy trying not to give the right answers, we wouldn't get time to eat anything. And eat is what we're going to do before you tell me anything. That is, if you *are* going to tell me anything."

"I am," Gene had said. "But I've got a hunch you already know some of it."

Dr. Foster had snorted indignantly. "I told you all I know."

"All you think you know," Gene had corrected.

"Could be." The physician had shrugged and reached for the coffee can.

When the coffee pot and flapjack batter bowl were both empty, Dr. Foster had lighted one of his long thin cigars and raised his eyebrows at Gene, sitting opposite. "Well, what did you find out?"

"First, an' most important," said Gene, "I found out that Ezra Binyon an' Mel Hodge are mighty thick."

The doctor looked a bit disgusted with himself. "I knew that and you're right. I didn't think it was important. I don't see how it can be, either."

"But it is," Gene declared. "Because after somebody described this Hodge hombre to me, I got to thinkin' about an outlaw named Max Hodgkins. Hodgkins had black straight hair and high cheek

bones—and yellow eyes—an' he always dressed in black from head to foot."

Foster nodded. "That fits Mel Hodge to a T."

"Well," Gene continued, "Hodgkins used to do his rampagin' along the Border an' duck over into Mexico when the law got too close. About ten years ago, he got nabbed an' sent to prison. He served five years. Since he got out, the law hasn't heard o' him." Seeing the doctor's mouth open, he raised a silencing hand. "Hold it a minute, Doc. While this hombre Hodgkins was in prison, his cellmate was a man called 'Banker' Groat. Nobody knows what Groat's real first name was. He got his nickname because he was so slick at robbin' banks." He paused; Doc looked as if he would burst unless given a chance to speak.

"Conchas, cactus, and cracker-barrels!" exploded Foster. " 'Banker' Groat! Ezra Binyon! Do you think—"

"I don't think anything—yet," Gene interrupted. "But I'm chockful o' suspicion. But thinkin' an' suspectin' something an' proving it are mighty far apart. Anyway, Groat was released about a year ahead o' Hodgkins. About two months later, the Territorial Bank in El Paso was cleaned out o' cash by an hombre answerin' Groat's description."

"So that's where Binyon got the money to come here and set himself up in business!" The physician

was too excited to sit still. Jumping up, he began to pace the room with jerky steps.

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Gene. "But remember—all this might be plain coincidence. Maybe Binyon isn't Groat. Maybe he never was in prison. Maybe he's just a bad hombre who came in here and behaved himself till he got folks to trustin' in him—till he got a lot o' cash an' power."

"You might be right about that last part," said Foster, walking faster. "But I'll give any odds he's Groat!"

Gene waited a minute, then grinned. "Doc! If you don't stop actin' like a bee-stung jack rabbit, an' light someplace, I won't tell you the other interestin' things I found out."

Foster plopped into his chair and ran his fingers through his hair until it looked more like a mop than a mane. "I'm lit," he chortled. "Go ahead."

"After the Territorial Bank robbery," Gene went on, "Groat dropped out o' sight. At least the law hasn't heard o' him since. Naturally he's still wanted for that job, an' there's a good-sized reward for him —dead or alive."

"What about Hodgkins?"

"The law doesn't want him—yet," replied Gene.

A quizzical expression came over the doctor's face. "Where did you get all this information, Gene?"

"It's a kind o' long story," said Gene. "It began

Wednesday mornin' when I talked to a rancher who was raided last week."

"Henry Norton?"

Gene nodded. "Norton swears Mel Hodge took part in that raid. He says he recognized Hodge's voice an' the way he rode. So, after leavin' Norton an' rememberin' about Hodgkins, I hit the trail for Gold City. I telegraphed Hodge's description to a pal o' mine in El Paso. I didn't want to send the wire from here. Savvy?"

"Sassafras and stagecoaches!" barked Foster. "Of course, I do! Go on."

"I asked my friend to check with lawmen who'd known Hodgkins an' see if Hodge's description jibed with the outlaw's. An' I asked him to try an' get a line on where Max Hodgkins was these days. I told him I'd wait in the Gold City telegraph office for his answer. Knowin' Hugh Crane, I knew it'd come pronto an'—"

"Knowin' *who?*" Foster bounced out of his chair, stared popeyed at Gene for a breathless couple of seconds, then sat down again. "Who did you say?"

"Hugh Crane," said Gene. "Do you know—" He stopped, struck by an astonishing thought. "Great Scott, *you're* his uncle!"

The doctor nodded. "He's the man I was visiting in El Paso. The one I mentioned who pointed you out to me that day."

"But I thought—" Gene stopped again. It might be better if he shared his suspicions of Tall-Corn with no one for the present. However, in the split second before Dr. Foster spoke, he decided to let the physician in on his business in San Juan county. If Hugh's uncle could not be trusted, nobody around here could.

"You thought what?" prompted the doctor.

Gene smiled. "I thought you'd be a lot older. All Hugh said was that he had an uncle here an' that's why he couldn't come up to do any investigatin'. Somebody might recognize him."

Understanding swept into the other's eyes. "I'm beginning to see the light," he said quietly. "You came in his place?"

Gene nodded.

"Did you know about Binyon's mortgage business and insurance deviltry before I told you?"

Gene shook his head. "All I knew was that your nephew's insurance company—the Great Western—was suspicious of Binyon because they'd had to pay him so many claims lately. Hugh had the idea the claims weren't legitimate. He figured Binyon was workin' a fraud, or at the most he might be dealin' in arson."

"And murder," Dr. Foster added harshly. His cigar had gone out. He lighted it again, then said, "To get back to you and Gold City and the telegram,

am I right in presuming that Hugh's answer contained all of the information about Groat and Hodgkins?"

"No," said Gene. "He couldn't tell me about Groat because, at that time, I didn't know about Groat myself. But Hugh dug up the information that Max Hodgkins had served a term in state's prison. So I went to the prison and saw the warden."

Foster gasped. "You've ridden all the way to state's prison and back since Wednesday?"

"Since Wednesday night," said Gene. He added proudly, "You don't know Champion, Doc. He's really a long horse."

"He must be!" ejaculated the doctor. "To travel that distance at the speed you must have had to keep up to—" He finished the sentence with an incredulous gesture instead of words. Then he shook his head and remarked, "I should think you'd both be out on your feet."

Gene smiled. "We bedded down at the prison for a few hours Thursday night an' out at the Box-W last night."

"Much to the Weylands' delight, I presume." Foster's eyes were twinkling.

"They acted as though they were glad to see us," chuckled Gene, "even if I did get them out o' bed last night. But I made up for it this mornin'. I left early—before they were out o' bed."

"Did you tell them where you'd been?"

Gene shook his head. "That's just between you an' me for now, Doc." He smiled. "I sure was glad to find Tod lookin' so chipper an' Cindy in such swell spirits. They're a great pair o' youngsters."

"They certainly are!" declared Foster warmly.

Gene pushed back his chair, rose to his feet. "Thanks for the chuck, Doc. It sure hit the spot."

Foster stood up, too. "And thank you for your confidence, Gene. I assure you it isn't misplaced. And if you need any help—" He let it go at that, knowing Gene understood.

"More'n likely, I'll need plenty!" Gene reached for his hat.

"Where are you bound now?" asked the doctor as they walked across the office.

"To look up Mel Hodge," replied Gene. "I'm gettin' real anxious to come face-to-face with that hombre."

Foster glanced at the clock. "At this time of day, he'll either be at the hotel or the Golden Arrow."

"I'll try the saloon first," said Gene.

But when Gene left the office and glanced down the street, he saw something that made him decide to postpone the planned meeting with Mel Hodge. In front of the hotel were a short, spare-framed man and a small brown burro. He recognized both of them and the recognition warmed him. They were

the answer to one of the telegrams he had sent the preceding Tuesday. Allowing himself a brief, pleased chuckle, he headed down the street toward his old friends, Jocko the burro and Flapjack Hobbs.

CHAPTER TWELVE

FLAPJACK HOBBS

By the time Gene reached the hotel, half a dozen men were grouped around Flapjack, completely hiding him. In fact, thought Gene, if it weren't for Flapjack's voice nobody would know the old fellow was anywhere around.

"Step right up!" Flapjack was shouting in his familiar twang. "Got ever'thing for ever'body! Best see-lection west o' th' Pecos! Ever'thing from wipes tuh bonnet strings! Whut'll it be, gents? Bronc belts? Conchas? Name it! I got it!"

Gene halted at the corner of the hotel. It might be wise to give Flapjack a chance to make a sale or two before showing himself. Not that the old man would intentionally give anything away until he knew what lay behind Gene's telegram, but the deeper he got into his character of the peddler, the less danger there would be of his making a slip.

A burly man in a stained leather jacket held up a pair of bright blue suspenders. "How much?"

"Three dollars!" cackled Flapjack. "Pos-i-tively guaranteed to last fer life."

"Whose life?" guffawed a rawboned giant standing

next to the burly man. "Yours or his?"

In the general laughter that followed, the burly man pulled the suspenders out full-length, then let them snap back. "They got a lot o' zip in 'em," he said.

"Shore hev!" Flapjack declared. "Cheap, too!"

The rawboned giant grinned at his burly neighbor. "Goin' to buy 'em, Thaxter?"

Lije Thaxter snapped the suspenders again. "Not for three dollars," he said. "They ain't worth more'n six bits."

"Whut!" screeched Flapjack.

Gene choked back a chuckle. He could picture how his old friend looked at that moment. Flapjack's chin would be thrust out belligerently, putting his long white beard at almost a right angle to his age- and weather-wrinkled face. His blue eyes, under their shaggy brows, would be snapping sparks. Nobody he knew could top Flapjack when it came to looking indignant.

"I said they ain't worth more'n six bits," Thaxter repeated. He jammed the suspenders in his coat pocket and fished in his pants pocket for some coins. "An' that's what I'm payin' you for 'em."

"No, sir-ee!" barked Flapjack. "Cain't hev 'em less'n three dollars."

Now Gene could see Flapjack's hands making wild motions in the air. Suddenly one of the hands made

a grab for the suspenders. But Thaxter, with a raucous laugh, raised them out of the old man's reach with one hand and threw some coins on the sidewalk with the other.

"Can't have 'em, huh?" Thaxter leered. "Wal, I got 'em, ain't I? So pipe down an' pocket your six bits."

Flapjack snorted angrily. "Gimme three dollars! Or I'll git th' law!"

"You'll do what?" snarled Thaxter, his face darkening. "Why, you little sawed-off runt! I'll learn you to get fresh with me!" He grabbed Flapjack's shoulder, lifted the smaller man off his feet and began to shake him.

Gene strode forward. Flapjack was kicking and throwing his fists around. He was also yelling at the top of his lungs.

"Lemme down, yuh ornery, bowlegged, disreppitable sidewinder!" he shouted. "Lemme down! I'll show yuh—" His voice stopped abruptly as, Thaxter having loosed his hold, he sat down hard on the stone sidewalk.

Thaxter, arms akimbo, stood over him. "Okay, gran'pa!" he jeered. "I'm waitin' to be showed!"

"You won't have to wait long!" snapped Gene. "Turn around!"

Thaxter whirled, but backed up a step when he saw Gene's raised and ready fists. "Who're *you?*" he

snarled. "An' what's the idea o' stickin' your nose into this business?"

Gene's eyes narrowed. "The name's Texas Gene," he said coldly, "an' I'm makin' this business, *my* business."

Thaxter's glance darted from Gene to Flapjack, who was slowly getting to his feet, then back to Gene. "Is this old galoot a pal o' yours?" he asked suspiciously.

"No," lied Gene, not moving his eyes from Thaxter's scowling face. "But I'm kinda soft when it comes to old-timers. I don't like to see them get pushed around. So—since you're all-fired set on lockin' horns with somebody, I've decided to oblige you."

As he spoke, Gene was looking straight into Thaxter's eyes. When he saw them harden, he knew what was coming and he was ready. Before Thaxter's hand could move more than two inches toward his hip, Gene's own gun was in his hand, its muzzle pointing at the other's chest. Thaxter stiffened. His breath made a hissing noise as he forced it out between his teeth. A combined gasp went up from the other men. Flapjack grinned—but lowered his head to hide the fact.

"Clasp your hands behind your head!" Gene barked at Thaxter. When the burly man had obeyed, Gene spoke to the rawboned giant. "What's your name, mister?"



Gene Leveled His Gun at Thaxter

"Uh—Len Morris," the man gulped.

"Are you a friend o' this hombre?"

"Uh," Morris gulped again and eyed Thaxter somewhat fearfully. "I don't know as I'd go so far as to say that. I know him but—"

Flapjack bounced forward. "Humph!" he snorted. "One shore thing! *I* ain't his friend! Whut's on yore mind, Texas?"

A smile played across Gene's face, but it was such a fleeting smile no one but Flapjack realized it was anything more than a shadow.

"I aim to knock this bullyin' coyote clean out o' his boots," said Gene, "if you don't mind relievin' him o' his shootin' iron."

Flapjack grinned from ear to ear. "Shore thing!" Gingerly he pulled Thaxter's gun from its holster. He hefted it, looking questioningly at Gene. "Now whut?"

Gene held out his own gun. "Now you take this—an' then you move back—" His eyes swept the semicircle of tense faces—"*All* o' you!"

The men practically stepped on one another's toes in their haste to obey. Most of them had heard of the thrashing this Texas Gene had given Curly Ransome. They had no wish to be within range of his fists, or to become the target for his anger.

"Well," drawled Gene, "ready for your lickin'?"

Thaxter roared an oath as he leaped forward, his

arms moving from his head like a pair of swiftly striking snakes. Gene ducked under them. And when Thaxter, missing with both fists, was forced to claw at the air to keep on his feet, Gene shoved a hard right into the other's stomach. He followed it with a jolting left against Thaxter's jaw. The second blow rocked Thaxter but by this time he had regained his balance. His right caught Gene alongside the jaw, jarring him violently.

Gene lashed back at him, then stood toe-to-toe exchanging some blows, ducking others. He knew other men were running up; he could hear their excited exclamations. And he could hear Flapjack yelling, too.

"Go it, Tex!" The old man was screaming. "Yippee! Lookit! Reg'lar pile-drivin' punches! Yee-ow!"

Suddenly Flapjack broke off in the middle of a shout. The crowd fell back. Heavy running footsteps echoed on the sidewalk. Gene heard them and was not too surprised when a crisp, clipped voice rang out.

"I've got my gun on you two," it barked. "An' I'll singe the first one that throws another punch."

Thaxter's arms dropped to his sides. "Sheriff Garey!" he gasped. There was a definite note of relief in his voice.

Gene, too, lowered his hands. Except for a redness on the left side of his jaw, he looked as unruffled as

when the fight had started. He darted a look at Thaxter. Sweat was dripping down the burly man's face. His jaw was beginning to swell and a thin trickle of blood was seeping from one nostril.

The sheriff stepped between them and, with his elbows, pushed them farther apart. "You sure look a mess!" he snapped at Thaxter. "Wipe off your face." As Thaxter reached for his neckerchief, Garey turned to Gene. "So it's you." He glowered.

Gene's eyes were mocking. "Reckon it is," he drawled, "unless you're lookin' at somebody behind me."

A little titter went up from the crowd.

Sheriff Garey reddened with anger. "Don't get smart-alecky with me," he told Gene gruffly, "or I'll throw you in the calaboose."

Gene shrugged. "I never heard it was against the law to talk back—even to a sheriff."

"It's against the law to disturb the peace!" roared Garey. "An' that's what you were doin'!"

"I wasn't disturbin' the peace," said Gene. "I was protectin' a citizen." He indicated Flapjack. "*This* citizen."

Flapjack nodded vigorously. "Right, Sheriff! This here polecat—" He pointed Gene's gun at Thaxter and chuckled when the burly man yelped— "tried tuh gyp me. Took some s'penders. Wouldn't pay my price. Said fer me tuh take six-bits or nothin'."

The sheriff glared at Thaxter. "Is that true?"

Thaxter shifted uneasily. "I was only havin' a little fun with him, Sheriff. I—"

"That ain't the way I saw it."

To Gene's surprise, Len Morris was the speaker. Apparently the law's arrival had given Morris a fresh dose of courage, or he had decided he wasn't afraid of Thaxter any more.

Stepping forward, Morris went on. "Texas Gene was tellin' the truth, Sheriff. An' so was—uh—" He looked questioningly at Flapjack.

"Name's Hobbs," Flapjack supplied. "Flapjack Hobbs."

"An' so was Hobbs," continued Morris. "Thaxter wouldn't pay what Hobbs asked for the suspenders. An' when Hobbs raised a fuss, Thaxter started to rough him up. So if you're gonna throw anybody in that calaboose o' yours, Garey, throw Lije Thaxter."

The sheriff reflected briefly. "Do you want to swear out a warrant chargin' Thaxter with assault, Hobbs?"

Flapjack scratched his cheek and squinted upward as if thinking over the matter. In reality, he was squinting at Gene in hopes of catching a signal that would tell him what Gene wanted him to say. Gene's head moved ever so slightly in a negative gesture, but Flapjack saw it. Pursing his lips, he looked back at the sheriff.

"Nope!" he declared. "Jest want my three dollars!"

Garey held out his hand. "Hand it over, Thaxter."

Thaxter pulled a handful of silver from his pocket. After he counted out three dollars into the sheriff's palm, he growled, "Reckon I can have my gun back now."

Garey gave Flapjack the money and took the two guns. He broke both of them open, spilled the cartridges into his coat pocket and returned them to their respective owners. "Now," he barked, "clear the street! Break it up! Vamoose! Every last man o' you! Or, by glory, I'll start makin' arrests pronto."

That threat scattered the curious crowd. Only then did Gene see the open peddler's pack affixed to Jocko's back. He chuckled inwardly. Flapjack must have spent hours getting all that stuff together. He looked back at the sheriff as the latter snapped at Thaxter.

"That get goin' order means you, too!"

A sneer curled the burly man's thick lips. "I'm goin', Sheriff." His eyes met Gene's. "Better use the middle o' the street from here on, cowpoke. 'Cause the next time I spot you, I'm liable to start slingin' lead."

"Like blazes you will!" bellowed Garey. "There'll be no gun-slingin' contests in Broken Bow while I'm sheriff!" He lunged for Thaxter, but the latter, mov-

ing rapidly for one of his size, was out of reach. He was running across the street toward the Golden Arrow. His raucous laugh floated back to the trio on the sidewalk.

"By the great horned spoon!" Garey exploded. "I'll run that lowdown gunny an' the rest o' his *compadres* outa this town if it's the last thing I ever do!"

Flapjack tugged at his beard. "Prob'ly will be!" he cackled.

Garey swung on him. "Don't get so all-fired fresh or—" He stopped, his eyes narrowing. "By the way, Hobbs, where's your license to peddle?"

"L-License?" gulped Flapjack.

"Yes!" Garey snapped. "This town's got a law that says anybody wantin' to peddle here has got to fork over five dollars for a license. That's to protect our local storekeepers."

Flapjack rummaged in his pockets. "Gosh a'mighty!" he said finally. "Only got three dollars! An' four bits!"

Sheriff Garey took hold of his arm. "Then I guess you'll be spendin' the next thirty days visitin' me."

"Guess again, Sheriff," said Gene. "Here's the cash for his license."

Looking considerably annoyed, Garey took the money Gene was holding out. "Drop 'round to the office this afternoon," he said to Flapjack. "I'll have your license made out." He headed across the street,

his short quick steps indicative of the agitation he still felt.

"Shore will!" Flapjack called after him. "Thanks." He turned a broad grin toward Gene and winked. "Thanks tuh you, too, Texas. Fer *ever'thing.*"

"That's okay." Gene grinned back. "I'm always glad to help out an old-timer." He stepped to the open pack. "I'm needin' a new neckerchief. Got any worth wearin' in this pack o' yours?" He spoke loudly. Anyone who might be listening would not suspect that he and Flapjack were anything but brand-new acquaintances.

Flapjack hurried after him. "Got th' best wipes west o' th' Pecos!" He dived into the pack and pulled out a large brown silk square. "Here! Ever seen sich a peacheroo?" As he handed the neckerchief to Gene, he whispered, "Whut next?"

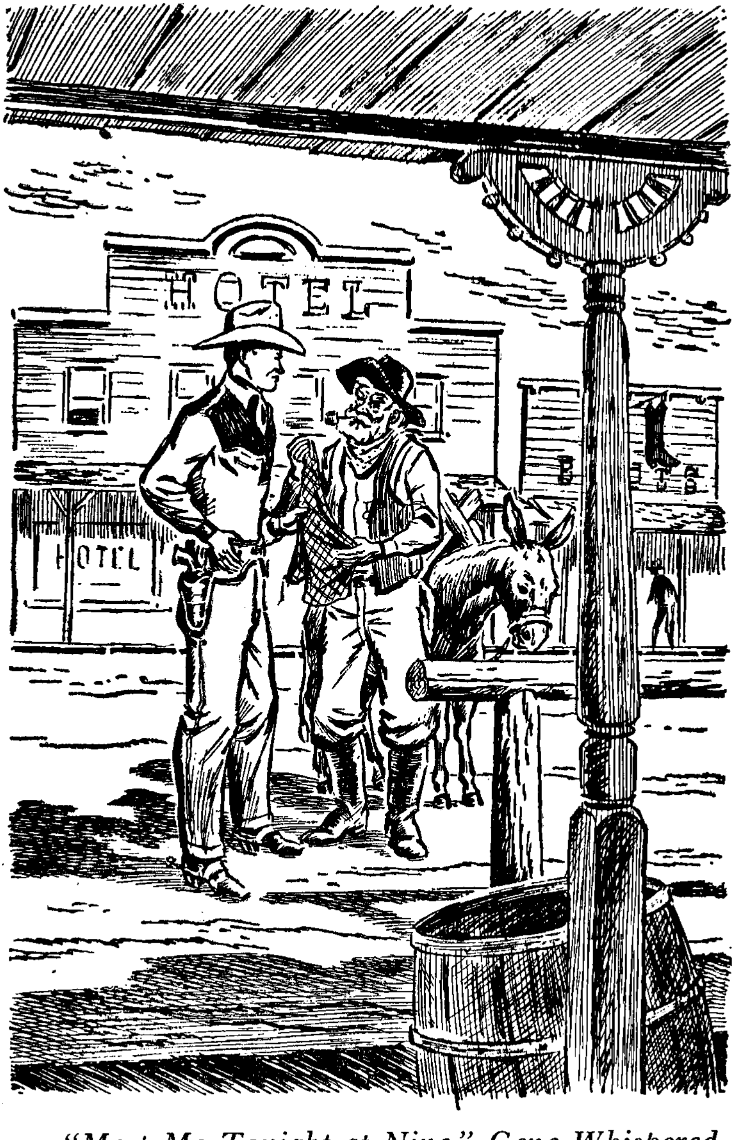
"It is kinda neat," said Gene loudly. Under his breath, he added, "Meet me tonight—nine o'clock—woodshed back o' Doc Foster's house."

Flapjack pretended to be deeply interested in Gene's inspection of the brown silk neckerchief. "Shore will!" he mumbled.

"I'll take this one," said Gene in his normal tone after a moment. "How much?"

Flapjack shook his head. "Cain't pay me, Texas! Too all-fired grateful fer whut yuh done."

Gene shrugged. "Suit yourself, old-timer. An'



"Meet Me Tonight at Nine," Gene Whispered

thanks." He strolled away, knotting the new neckerchief around his throat in place of the sweat-wilted one.

All at once, Gene knew someone was staring at him, and in no friendly manner, either. The hairs on the back of his neck were prickling as they always did when trouble, or danger, was near. Halting, under pretense of adjusting the neckerchief, he swept the street with a keen, searching glance.

The street was practically empty. Flapjack was busy with his peddler's pack. Three men stood in a little knot on the steps of Jess Mason's store. Rumbling wheels in the near distance told of the approach of a wagon, a large wagon, judging from the cloud of dust it was raising.

Gene shifted his glance across the street, and tensed. The doors of the Golden Arrow were swinging as if someone had just passed through them. Only then did he recall that, while he had been buying the neckerchief from Flapjack, two men, one tall and one medium-sized, had been standing in front of those doors. He could not recall anything about the medium-sized man, but the tall man had been lean-limbed and sinewy—and he had been dressed in black!

Mel Hodge! Gene did not say the words aloud; he only thought them. "Reckon I'll drift over to the saloon," he muttered. "It ought to be a real inter-

estin' call if Hodge an' Thaxter are both there."

But again Gene was forced to postpone the meeting with the owner of the Golden Arrow. For, as he stepped off the sidewalk, he realized that the large wagon, whose dust cloud he had glimpsed, was rolling down the street. It was not just a plain wagon. It was a stagecoach. And as it passed, he saw a freckled face grinning at him from the near window. It was the face of Johnny Trask, topnotch cowhand and, Gene hoped, the new foreman of the Box-W.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A TOPNOTCH COWHAND

It was crowding two o'clock when Gene and Johnny Trask rode through the wide rustic gate at the Box-W.

They had been busy since Johnny's arrival—especially from a conversational standpoint. However, they had done more than talk to one another. Almost before the dust raised by the stagecoach had settled, Johnny had met Dr. Foster. The physician was checking over the contents of his saddlebags preparatory to starting out on his daily round of calls, but he had taken time to greet Johnny. And he had pumped the latter's hand so heartily in welcome, the big cowboy had grimaced.

"Gosh," Johnny said when Foster finally released his hand. "That handshake sure shook me—all over. If you always shake hands like that, I reckon it's real good for your business. Another minute an' you'd have dislocated my shoulder."

"Teepees and tumbleweeds!" Foster boomed. "You ought to be complimented instead of complaining. That's the handshake I use for folks I like. When I meet somebody I don't like, I hardly touch

gloves with them."

Johnny's gray-green eyes twinkled teasingly. "How do you know you like me? You just met me."

"Humph!" Foster snorted. "Gene likes you. That's good enough for me." Shaking his forefinger for emphasis, he added, "And the Weylands will like you, too. Take good care of them, Trask. They're my special pets."

"I'll do my best, Doctor Foster," Johnny soberly promised.

"That's good enough for me, too," Foster returned, closing his saddlebags. He hung them over his arm and headed for the back door. "Help yourselves to anything in the house, boys. I locked the front door. When you leave, lock the back one and put the key under the step." He chuckled. "Not that I've got anything worth stealing, but I don't want strangers snooping around in here."

Gene grinned. "There isn't a sneak thief livin' who doesn't look under doorsteps for house keys first off."

Foster snorted, yanked his hat from the wall peg, slapped it on his head and opened the door. On the sill, he turned back. "Another thing— There's an extra horse in my barn—a sorrel named Gypsy. Maybe you'd like to use him, Trask, till you get a mount of your own out at the Box-W?"

"I sure would!" Johnny's face glowed with pleas-

ure. "Thanks a lot, Doctor Foster."

The door closed behind the doctor, but almost immediately, it opened again, just wide enough for Foster to poke his head back into the room.

"Another thing, Trask," he chortled. "You can call me Doc."

"Thanks," said Johnny. "An' you can call me Johnny."

The wide smile made Foster's face look like a full moon with a red light glowing on it. "I was going to do that little thing," he said, "when I saw you tonight."

"You're seein' me tonight?" Johnny asked with some surprise.

Foster nodded. "I'm dropping in at the Box-W for supper. You don't think I'd miss finding out what kind of an impression you make on Cindy Weyland—and what kind she makes on you." He was gone before Johnny could think of an appropriate answer.

Gene's laugh filled the kitchen. "Don't mind Doc, Johnny," he said. "Bein' a bachelor, he's a born matchmaker. Leastwise, he acts like he's set on marryin' Cindy off to somebody. He kinda sounded me out on the idea but I put the kibosh on it, pronto."

"I'll bet you did!" Johnny stood on tiptoe and stretched; his fingertips almost brushed the kitchen ceiling. "Specially seein' as you're married already."

Gene gulped. "You long-legged, loco ranahan! What in blazes are you talkin' about?"

Johnny stretched again. Then grinned at Gene. "You're married—to your work."

Gene made a wry face. "You make me sound like an old fogy."

"Well?" Johnny ducked the hand towel Gene threw at him and, when he straightened, eyed the coffee can significantly. "Doc said to help ourselves to anything in the house," he mused. "Do you suppose that meant we could help ourselves to a pot o' coffee an' maybe a couple o' eggs on the side?"

Gene picked up the coffee pot. "I know it did," he said. "I'm not hungry, though. Doc fed me earlier. But I'll rustle you some chuck while you wash up an'—" he surveyed Johnny's travel-stained clothes, "change clothes. Those you're wearin' look like you'd been ridin' drag the whole length o' the Chisholm Trail."

Johnny had left his bedroll (without which no self-respecting cowhand would think of traveling) in the office. He went to get it. While Gene spooned coffee into the pot, he heard Johnny whistling gaily and he chuckled softly. Johnny was not only a topnotch cowhand, he was quite a hand with the girls, too. The impression Cindy Weyland would make on him would be worth seeing.

While Johnny consumed the entire contents of

the coffee pot and ate not two eggs but four, Gene brought him up-to-date on the situation in San Juan county. He made his story a brief but complete one.

After he finished, he was not surprised when Johnny drew his gun, laid it on the table and said, "There is my gun, Gene. You can count on it an' me stickin' till the last one o' those ornery varmints is doin' the Texas cakewalk from the tree that's nearest when we rope him."

"Thanks, Johnny," Gene said. "I figured you'd feel that way about it." He stood up. "Now let's clean up these dishes—so Doc'll let us come here again—an' then hightail it for the Box-W."

Johnny's eyes brightened. "Suits me." He laughed, pushing back his chair and rising to his feet in one fluid movement. "I'm gettin' real anxious to come face-to-face with Miss Cindy Weyland."

A little frown puckered Gene's forehead. What Johnny had said sounded very familiar. Where had he recently heard similar words? Rinsing out the coffee pot, he remembered. He had used them himself when speaking to Doc about going to find Mel Hodge. His frown deepened. Fate seemed to be working against his meeting the owner of the Golden Arrow. First, Flapjack's arrival, then Johnny's—

"What're you scowlin' about?" Johnny was eyeing him puzzledly. "If it's what I said about meetin' Miss Cindy—"

"It isn't," Gene broke in. "I was just rememberin' something I've got to do before I hit the hay tonight."

"See Hodge?"

Gene nodded and exchanged his frown for a smile. "Same as always, isn't it, Johnny?" At the big cowboy's blank expression, he explained, "I mean the way we work together. We don't need words. Not many of them, at any rate. I think something; you get it."

Johnny stuck his thumbs into his belt and puffed out his chest. "Sure, I get it. I'm a plumb smart cowpoke." He cast a sidelong glance at the small mirror above the sink and added, slyly, "An' I'm a right good-lookin' one, too."

Although she expressed it in different words, Cindy Weyland reached the same conclusion when she first saw Johnny. However, she did not mention it to Tod. He and she were sitting on the rustic benches under the spreading cottonwood when Gene and Johnny came up the ranch road. In the brief time it took the two men to dismount and cross the yard, Cindy decided that Johnny Trask—if that were the name of Gene's companion—was one of the best-looking men she had ever seen. She also decided she would like him immensely. It was odd, she thought as she shook hands with him, that he seemed to know what she was thinking, how she felt. For when he

looked full into her face, his eyes grew soft with unspoken understanding.

Ten minutes later, the introductions and explanations were over and Johnny was hired as the new foreman of the Box-W. As it was time for Tod to take the nap Dr. Foster had prescribed for him every afternoon, Cindy offered to show Johnny around the ranch and introduce him to the boys.

"And will you please come, too, Gene?" she asked.

Gene frowned. "Is Curly still actin' rambunctious?"

"Oh, no!" Cindy assured him. "He's been wonderful. But—well, I don't talk the boys' language—yet—and—"

"I savvy," Gene laughingly interrupted. "An' I'll be glad to go along after a few private words with Tod." He started after Tod who was halfway up the stairs to his room.

"We'll wait here for you," said Cindy. She settled herself on the couch and, smiling at Johnny, indicated the chair across the room. "Won't you sit down, Mr. Trask?"

"Thanks, ma'am." Johnny grinned. "It's sure swell o' you, offerin' to show me around. I've met a heap o' guides in my time but I'm dawgoned sure I never met any as pretty as you."

Cindy dimpled. "You must have kissed the Blarney stone, Mr. Trask."



"Won't You Sit Down, Mr. Trask?"

A merry twinkle danced in Johnny's eyes. "Miss Cindy, I don't go around kissin' *stones.*" At her quick flush, he added hastily, "No offense, ma'am. I—"

"No offense," she smiled. "I asked for that one. Do you know what the Blarney stone is?"

It was Johnny's turn to redden. "No, ma'am," he confessed.

"It's a stone in a castle in Ireland," explained Cindy. "If you kiss it, you're supposed to be blessed from that time on with the ability to flatter people and make them like it."

"So you liked what I said about your bein' so pretty," teased Johnny.

"I didn't say that!" Cindy looked away from him and tossed her head.

The sun caught in her red curls, and Johnny caught his breath. He had never seen such beautiful hair, nor such a beautiful girl, either. He hoped she'd like him. Real well, too. Maybe she'd think he was fresh, paying her compliments first rattle out of the box. But—

"Well, Mr. Trask," Cindy's voice, coolly polite, cut into his thoughts, "Gene is coming down the stairs. If you don't mind waiting until night to do your dreaming, suppose we start on our tour?"

Blinking, Johnny jumped to his feet. "I'm sorry, ma'am." He smiled down at her. "One o' these days, I'll tell you what I was dreamin' about."

"That could hardly interest me," said Cindy; her tone was still cool.

Johnny shortened his steps to hers as they walked toward Gene. "It might, ma'am—some day," he said softly. "An' won't you please stop callin' me Mr. Trask? My name's Johnny. An' I sure hope I haven't riled you by gettin'—well, sorta friendly right off." He flushed to the tips of his ears. "I just—uh—couldn't help it—if you know what I mean."

He looked so much like a small boy who has been unjustly punished, Cindy softened. "You haven't riled me—Johnny. And I do know what you mean. I feel as if we weren't new friends, but old ones."

Watching them, Gene was glad he had thought of sending for Johnny. He had a powerful hunch that, through Johnny Trask, not only the future and safety of the Box-W was assured but the future and safety of Cindy Weyland as well.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FLAPJACK STARTS "DETECKATIN'"

Dr. Foster looked more than a little surprised when he pulled up at the Box-W hitchrack around sundown and saw Gene waving to him from the top rail of the corral fence. Cindy was perched alongside Gene. She turned to see whom Gene was greeting.

"Hi, Doc!" she called. She, too, waved, then turned back to watch whatever was going on in the corral.

"Hi yourself!" Foster called back. He slipped wearily out of the saddle and began to tie up the sturdy little mustang. "I'm an old fool," he muttered. "Trying to pretend I'm still young enough to ride horseback all day and not mind it." He sighed. "Guess I'll have to buy myself a buggy and be done with it."

"They say when you talk to yourself, you've got cash in the bank," came a voice behind him.

With a start, Foster swung around. Gene was standing a few feet away, grinning at him.

"Peppers and pot-handles!" the doctor barked. "You scared me out of five years' growth! And I'm getting to the age where I can't afford to lose five

years—or even five months.'

Gene laughed. "The way you talk, Doc, a body'd think you had one foot in the grave an' the other on a hunk o' axle grease." He crooked his arm as the doctor came toward him. "Want to use my arm for a crutch, old-timer?"

Foster threw back his head and laughed heartily. "You impudent scalawag!" he said when he could spare enough breath from his laughter to speak. "I ought to take you out in the woodshed and give you a caning."

"You're free to try it." Gene grinned.

The doctor chuckled deep in his throat. "I have no doubts about being free enough. The question is: am I game enough?" He nodded toward the corral. "What's going on over there?"

"Johnny's pickin' himself a string an' Cindy's helpin' him," replied Gene.

Foster whistled softly. "So that's how it is—and so soon, too."

"That's how it is," said Gene. "An' what do you mean 'so soon'? They've stuck closer'n cockleburs to a mare's tail ever since Johnny an' I got here."

The doctor smacked his palms together. "That's the best news I've heard in days!" he exclaimed. "Ever since Cindy came out here, I've hoped she'd meet somebody—" He broke off to glance again at the corral. "Where's Tod?"

"Cindy made him go in awhile ago," said Gene. "He was lookin' a mite white around the gills. She told him to lie down till suppertime or she'd see to it you didn't let him up all day tomorrow."

Chuckling, Foster linked arms with Gene. "Let's go sit on the porch till it's time to wash up for supper." Nodding toward the corral, he added, "They won't miss us."

In silence the two men walked around the house. A little cooling breeze had sprung up and the sunset was tinting the bluebonnets with red and gold.

Gene took a deep breath. The air smelled sweet and clean. "This is the best hour o' the whole twenty-four," he said, sitting down on the top porch step alongside Foster.

"Right," agreed the doctor with a little sigh. After a moment, he said, "I didn't expect to find you here tonight, Gene. I thought you'd be—well, in one of three places."

"Three places?" Gene echoed.

"At the Golden Arrow—Boot Hill—or jail."

Gene cocked a quizzical eyebrow. "Why Boot Hill? Why jail?"

"My patients don't spend all their time talking about their aches and pains," Foster replied. "They tell me things. I dropped in at Morris's this afternoon. Len was spilling over with information, and admiration. He couldn't stop talking about that

lightning draw of yours. Nor Thaxter's threat. Nor Garey's obvious dislike for you."

"Oh," said Gene. "But what gave you the idea *I'd* be the one in Boot Hill or jail? Why not Thaxter?"

"Barrels and bobcats!" Foster exclaimed. "Don't you know when you're being joshed?" He nudged Gene with a playful elbow. "I was getting even with you for that 'old-timer' remark."

Gene snickered. "I figured that would get under your hide, Doc." He sobered. "Did you hear anything interestin', or useful, this afternoon?"

"If you mean about Hodge or Binyon—no!" Foster was decisive. "But the whole county's buzzing about *you*. Wondering who you are, what you're up to, where you came from. I don't know which made me more tired—listening to their questions or trying not to answer them."

"Sorry you're so pestered, Doc," said Gene. "But I've got an idea you won't have to put up with it much longer."

Foster tensed with interest. "You've made a plan for trapping those vultures?"

"You couldn't exactly call it a plan—yet," said Gene. "It's more like a hunch. Maybe after I pay my call at the Golden Arrow tonight, I'll be able to figure out a plan though."

"That reminds me," mused Foster, "why didn't you go there this afternoon?"

"Because my main purpose in goin' there is to see Hodge. An' Tod told me Hodge isn't usually around in the afternoons. Seems he rides up into the hills some place. Probably up to the gang's hide-out." Gene's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "An' tomorrow afternoon—if things go right—I aim to trail him."

"That will be rather risky business," cautioned the doctor. "Those men would gun you down at the drop of a hat."

A slow, lazy smile spread across Gene's face. "Doc," he drawled, "I don't aim to drop mine."

Supper was a meal gay with unimportant but interesting talk and satisfying with some of the best examples of Hop Low's cookery. When he rode back to town, to keep his appointment with Flapjack, Gene let remembrance of it crowd everything else from his mind. As he had told Foster, he had formed no definite plan for bringing Binyon and his fellow-conspirators to justice. It was too early to form one. Besides, he was a firm believer in watchful waiting, in letting the other fellow make the fatal slip. Through years of experience, he had found out the truth of the old saying: "If you give an hombre enough rope, he'll sure as shootin' hang himself." At any moment, Binyon might make a misstep, or Hodge (if he *were* in cahoots with the banker as seemed highly probable) would provide the key that would force the solution of the puzzle. He was pa-

tient; he could afford to wait, a little longer, anyway. Therefore, as he rode under a cloudless, star-studded sky, he thought about the gay and satisfying supper, and about the people who had enjoyed it with him.

There was no doubt that Cindy and Johnny were strongly attracted to one another. Both Tod and Doc had realized it, too. Gene grinned. He had noticed Curly Ransome, who as range boss ate with the Weylands, giving the pair sly, wise glances. He had feared Curly might be jealous of Johnny, both because of Cindy and because of the foreman's job, but the two men had hit it off from the moment of their meeting. Probably it was because they were both big men, physically and mentally. Curly had proved his bigness by the way he had taken Gene's beating. As for Johnny, he had long ago proved to Gene what manner of man he was.

Breaking into a little song about the lone prairie, Gene turned his thoughts to Tod. There was a lad for you! Gritty, honest, clean, and hard-working. Too bad there weren't more like him. And like Doc Foster, too. It was their kind of folks—and dozens of others he could name—who were building the right kind of a West. Men like Binyon and Hodge were not interested in building, only in tearing down.

He slowed Champion to a walk and stopped singing as the silhouetted buildings of Broken Bow came into sight. On the edge of town, he turned the great

chestnut off the road, made a wide circle and, fifteen minutes later, pulled up some little distance back of Doc's barn. Here he dismounted and, leaving Champion ground-reined, stole toward the woodshed. Although he did not think he was making any noise, he was still a few feet from the open door of the shed when a familiar voice came softly from the blackness inside.

" 'Bout time yuh wuz gittin' here!"

Gene chuckled. Only Flapjack could put so much indignation into a whisper. He sidled into the shed. "I'm ahead o' time," he said. "It's five to nine."

"No, sir-ee!" Flapjack contradicted. "It's five after."

"You're fast." Gene's eyes had become accustomed to the blackness now. He could see Flapjack squatted against the back wall.

"Shore ain't!" snapped Flapjack. "Gosh a'mighty, Gene! Quit gabblin' 'bout time! Start talkin'! Whut's up?" As Gene squatted close by, he added crossly, "Don't be expectin' *me* tuh talk! Said so much tuhday I'm plumb out o' tongue oil."

"You don't have to talk," Gene assured his old friend. "All you have to do is listen—an' follow orders."

Flapjack stuck his head forward like a chicken going for a big, juicy worm. "Orders? Sounds like more deteckatin'."

"It is." Gene smiled.

Flapjack allowed himself a dry, pleased chuckle. "Jest like old times. Yuh an' me! Roundin' up owl-hoots. Gosh a'—"

"We haven't rounded them up yet," Gene interrupted. "An' we won't if we don't get busy." He chortled. "For an hombre who was fed up with talkin', you're jabberin' like a honker on a new feed ground." He paused.

"Per-ceed!" snorted Flapjack.

In much the same words and with the same concise brevity, Gene repeated the story he had earlier told Johnny. When he finished, Flapjack bounced to his feet.

"Blasted buzzards!" he growled. "Ornery side-winders! Whut're we waitin' for? Let's move!"

Gene stood up and put his hand on the small man's shoulder. He could feel Flapjack shaking with rage. "Take it easy, *amigo*," he said, "an' put a checkrein on that temper. You're goin' to need a cool head to be any help to me."

Flapjack clenched and unclenched his fists two or three times. He took several deep breaths. "Okay now, Gene!" he said at last. "Got my temper hog-tied! Couldn't help losin' it! Hate rattlers! 'Speshly two-legged ones!" He took another deep breath. "Whut yuh want me tuh do?"

Gene removed his hand. Flapjack was okay now;

he had stopped shaking. "I want you to hang around the Golden Arrow," he said. "Keep your eyes an' ears open. I'm powerful interested in anything concernin' Hodge or Binyon. An'—"

" 'Nough said," Flapjack interrupted. "I savvy." He chuckled slyly. "Shore oughtta. Done it 'nough times."

Gene's laugh was soft but filled with appreciation and remembering. "You sure have, old-timer. Now, vamoose."

Flapjack started for the door, then hesitated. "Whar'll *yuh* be?"

"I'm goin' to see to Champ an' then I'll be over to the Golden Arrow myself," said Gene. "I've been tryin' all day to get a look at that Hodge hombre."

"Gosh a'mighty!" gasped Flapjack. "Don't want me ree-portin' thar, be yuh?"

Gene shook his head. Then, realizing that the blackness of the shed's interior prevented Flapjack from seeing the gesture, he said, "Of course not. I'll meet you back here at midnight."

"Okay!" In the doorway, Flapjack paused again. "Thought o' somethin'. Better git Betsy. Case trouble starts. She kin talk! Powerful loud!"

"If trouble starts," said Gene firmly, "you keep Betsy quiet. I reckon *my* six-gun can do all that kind o' talkin' that's necessary."

Flapjack walked away. As he passed through a

patch of moonlight, Gene saw that his shoulders were drooping a little. He smiled grimly, and reflected that, before all this was over, Flapjack would probably have plenty of opportunity to let "Betsy talk powerful loud." For Betsy was the old prospector's ancient, but still serviceable, Walker pistol.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AN EXPLOSIVE SITUATION

Half an hour later Gene pushed open the swinging doors of the Golden Arrow saloon and, for a moment, stood motionless surveying the big room. Except for the faces of the men at the bar and the gambling tables, it was like every other saloon he had ever seen. Along one side ran the long bar. A space between the bar and the card tables allowed ample room for the patrons to line up three-deep as they were lined tonight. He moved his glance toward the tables, wondering why they were so crowded, too. Then he remembered. It was Saturday night.

He moved forward a step, letting the doors swing to behind him. His eyes roved restlessly over the throng. He could see Tall-Corn Williams back of the bar, washing glasses, and he recalled Doc's having mentioned the fact that Tall-Corn had gone to work for Hodge. In the first line of customers at the bar, he spotted Sim Peters, the telegraph operator. Standing alongside Sim was Flapjack. The old fellow was pretending to be enjoying a glass of beer. Gene smiled to himself. He knew that the beer would find its way into the big brass spittoon not far from Flap-

jack's feet.

"Shore ain't no teetotaler," Gene had often heard Flapjack say. "Don't tetch th' stuff, though. 'Ceptin' when I ain't workin'."

Gene started for the bar but changed his mind. If he were absorbed into that crowd, it would be difficult for him to spot Hodge. However, if he strolled over to the faro table and pretended to be watching the game, he would have a clear view of the big room. In addition, the faro table was at one side of the room. Therefore, he could stand against a wall. In a situation that might turn out to be explosive, he would be safest with a wall at his back. Nobody could then sneak up behind him.

He was halfway to the faro table when he saw Hodge. He could not help but see him, for the saloon owner loomed in his path. Where he had come from so suddenly, Gene had no idea. But there he was, tall and lean-limbed in his black outfit, a mocking smile on his thin lips but no smile in his yellow eyes.

"Reckon you're the hombre who calls himself Texas Gene," drawled Hodge.

"Reckon so," Gene drawled back. "Who are you?"

Although neither man had spoken loudly, it seemed as if everybody in the place heard them and stopped whatever he was doing to listen. The silence started at the table alongside which they stood and

swept through the big room with hurricane speed.

The yellow eyes were inscrutable. "The name's Hodge—Mel Hodge. I run this place."

"That's right interestin'." Gene's eyes were equally inscrutable.

"Reckon why you dropped in might be right interestin', too," said Hodge. "I noticed you didn't stop at the bar."

"Maybe I don't like crowds," Gene suggested.

"Then you're sure in the wrong place." Hodge kept on smiling his mocking smile.

The hairs on the back of Gene's neck began to prickle, but his voice was quiet and conversational as he said, "You wouldn't be suggestin' I leave, would you?"

Hodge shrugged. "Whether you go or stay means nothin' to me—so long as you keep the peace. That means keepin' your gun holstered an' your fists from swingin'."

"Whether I do," said Gene, "depends on two things."

For the first time the yellow eyes changed expression. The look that came into them was half-quizzical, half-estimating. "I'm waitin' to hear what they are," Hodge said slowly.

"First," said Gene, "my keepin' the peace depends on whether any hombre takes a notion to dig up a tomahawk an' throw it at me. An' second, on whether



Gene and Hodge Met Face to Face

Lije Thaxter decides to make good that threat o' his to sling lead in my direction on sight."

Oddly Hodge looked a little relieved. Gene could see some of the tension leaving him. Very briefly his smile spread to his eyes. But it did not linger there, even while he said, "Thaxter won't be around, Texas Gene. He's left town. An' he won't be comin' back for a spell. So you needn't be scared o' *him* startin' anything."

Gene's eyes were glinting bits of blue steel. "Get this straight, Hodge," he snapped. "I'm not scared o' anything that walks, flies, swims, or crawls! An' if it's two-legged, I don't care how big it is or how fast it can draw. So from here on, I don't wanta hear any more o' that kind o' talk."

Silence followed Gene's words. It was a frightened, tense silence broken only by the gasping intake of a man's breath, the scrape of a boot heel on the floor. As for Hodge, he was rigid with tenseness. He did not even appear to be breathing. Only his eyes were alive. For perhaps three seconds, they gleamed with rage. Then they became inscrutable again. And again Gene could see some of the tension easing out of him. Apparently Hodge had decided not to force the issue now. That was not surprising. All of the men present could not possibly be his henchmen and Hodge was the kind of man who would never start a fight unless the odds were in his favor. However,

Hodge's next move was more than surprising, it was astounding, for the saloon owner chuckled and held out his hand.

"Reckon you an' me were cut off the same piece o' cloth, Texas Gene," he said, and in a fairly pleasant voice. "Shake!"

Although he would rather have shaken hands with a rattlesnake, Gene took the proffered hand. "Reckon so, Hodge." He half-expected the other man to take advantage of the handshake to go for his gun with his free hand, or lash out with his fist.

Hodge did neither. He gave Gene's gloved hand a quick but forceful shake and stepped aside. "Sorry for delayin' you in gettin' to where you were headed," he drawled. "But I'm right glad I finally met up with the most talked-about hombre in San Juan county."

"I'm right glad you did, too," said Gene dryly, "because now you savvy how come folks are doin' all that talkin'."

Putting a little swagger into his walk, Gene went on toward the faro table. Although he did not look back, he knew Hodge, and everyone else in the place, were staring after him. No one moved or spoke until he had taken his place at the wall by the faro game. Then everybody seemed to move and talk all at once. Quite a number left the saloon. Obviously, they thought a fuse had been lighted that would touch off

an explosion before the night was over, and they wanted to be safely away before that happened.

The faro dealer's hands were shaking so badly, he could hardly handle the cards. But he snapped them out on the table and the players, after a collective glance at Gene to reassure themselves he meant them no harm, went back to their game. Under the guise of watching them, Gene saw Hodge give the nod to a medium-sized man at a near-by poker table. The man threw down his cards and slid to his feet. He joined Hodge and the pair started to thread their way through the bar patrons, each of whom was shouting for another drink.

Gene tapped the faro dealer on the shoulder. "Who's the bird with Hodge?"

The dealer, who had half-risen in sudden fear at Gene's touch, glanced across the room. "I can't see." He avoided Gene's eyes and sank back in his chair.

"Then guess!" snapped Gene, his hand moving slowly toward his hip.

The dealer gave a convulsive gulp. "Uh—I reckon —uh—I mean it's Eddie Drake," he stammered.

"Thanks," said Gene. "Go on with the game." As he spoke, he looked back toward the bar.

Hodge and Drake had halted. They seemed to be listening to a chunky man—a rancher, judging by his clothes. Gene could not hear what the rancher was saying but he could see the man's face was distorted

with anger. He considered moving to within earshot but changed his mind when he noticed that Flapjack was at the rancher's elbow. Flapjack would not miss a syllable!

Gene was right. Flapjack had not missed anything, not even the expression on Hodge's face as the saloonkeeper listened to the rancher's angry words.

"Blast Ezra Binyon!" The man was livid with rage. "The rotten, dirty skinflint! Cheatin' an' robbin' honest men!" He gulped from the glass he was holding. A crafty look replaced his angry one. "Thinks he's gonna get my spread, does he? Gonna foreclose, he says, if I don't pay up by Monday noon. Well, I'm foolin' him! I'm payin' up at ten! Two hours ahead o' time." He laughed mirthlessly. "Just wait till I go into his office Monday mornin' an' throw three thousand dollars on his desk!" Running out of breath, he drained the glass, then turned to push the empty glass across the bar. "Fill 'er up, Nat!" he shouted.

Nat splashed whisky into the glass. "Where'd you get three thousand dollars, Stubbs?"

Stubbs laid his forefinger alongside his nose and chuckled. "Wouldn't you like to know?" His knees started to buckle and he reached for Flapjack's shoulder for support.

At that moment, Flapjack stepped forward, entirely unaware of Stubbs's action. Slowly the rancher sank toward the floor. He was within inches of being

flat on it when Sim Peters saw his predicament. Sim grabbed him by the coat collar, stood him up and propped him against the bar.

Meantime, Flapjack had wormed his way through the crowd and was watching Hodge and Drake (whose name he had learned earlier) move down the bar. When, at the rear of the room, they entered what was obviously an office, Flapjack gave a knowing little nod. As the door closed behind the two men, he turned. With effort, he forced himself to stroll to the swinging doors, nonchalantly push them open and proceed, still at a leisurely pace, out into the street. He was so intent on carrying out the pretense of being unhurried, he did not see the strange look with which Tall-Corn Williams followed his progress. Nor did he know, as he ran at top speed up the street and down the alley that cut alongside the Golden Arrow, that Tall-Corn, moving as silently as a shadow, was right behind him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A WOODSHED POWWOW

It was a few minutes before midnight when Gene again headed for the little woodshed back of Dr. Foster's house. The moon was low in the sky now. The night shadows no longer lay in small pools. They formed a veritable ocean of darkness through which he moved safely and swiftly. He had been moving through this shadow-ocean, unnoticed and unfollowed (he had made sure of that point), since leaving the Golden Arrow shortly after eleven. He had not intended to stay in the saloon so long. But when he had discovered Flapjack's absence, he had waited in the expectation that the old man would soon return with an explanation for his absence. When Flapjack did not come back, Gene had gone to look for him. This unsuccessful search had occupied him until his watch had told him it was nearing midnight.

Gene had not seen Flapjack leave the saloon. Upon discovering it, he had been at first annoyed, then worried. The annoyance was due to Flapjack's having left when he had been expressly told to stick around. The worry was occasioned by the realiza-

tion that only something mighty important could have made the old fellow go contrary to orders. Flapjack was utterly without fear. There was no telling where he might go or what he might do if he stumbled onto a clue he thought was a good one—and decided to follow it.

Gene quickened his pace. If Flapjack were not in the shed, and did not soon appear there, he would rouse the sheriff. He would tell the lawman the whole story. Between them, they would not only turn the town but the whole county upside-down until Flapjack was located.

When Gene reached the shed door, which was still open, he paused. For at least half a minute there was no sound from the blackness within. Then he heard a soft laugh. No, it wasn't one laugh—it was two. One was Flapjack's unmistakable dry chuckle. The other was the cackle of Tall-Corn Williams!

"What in blazes is goin' on in here?" demanded Gene, barging into the shed so violently he barked his shin on a chunk of wood. He ignored the sharp pain this caused and repeated his question.

Flapjack answered. "Long yarn, Gene. Better set. Cain't tell it in two shakes."

"You can tell me a heap sight quicker than that why Tall-Corn Williams is here!" barked Gene.

"I'll tell yuh."

The words were followed by a rustling sound.

Then Gene made out Tall-Corn's scarecrow-like silhouette against the paneless window in the shed's north wall.

Gene slid his hand to his gun butt. If there were some trickery involved—if Tall-Corn had Flapjack covered and was forcing him to pretend everything was okay, he wanted to be set for a fast draw. "Well!" he said crisply, "I'm waitin'."

"An' yuh can take yore hand off'n yore shootin' iron," cackled Tall-Corn. "I ain't holdin' no gun on Flapjack."

Gene did not move his hand but something in the other's voice made him feel a little more at ease about this unexpected and astounding situation.

"Remember me tellin' yuh I wanted to be on yore side, Texas Gene?" asked Tall-Corn. " 'Twas after we'd shook an' Miss Cindy wanted to know why I was thankin' you fer—"

"Yes!" Gene interrupted. "Go on."

"An'," Tall-Corn resumed, "remember me tellin' you 'bout Mel Hodge runnin' the Golden Arrer an' Ezra Binyon runnin' Hodge?"

"Of course! An' I'm not interested in goin' over all that now." Gene was growing irritated. "I want to know what you're doin' here—with Flapjack."

"I'm gettin' to thet," said Tall-Corn. "Y'see, I got to thinkin' an'—"

This time Flapjack interrupted. "Gosh a'mighty!

Quit coyotin' 'round th' rim! Git tuh th' p'int!"

Gene fought down the impulse to shout at both of them. "Suppose you do the talkin', Flapjack." It was an effort to keep his voice down but he managed it. "An' you can start by answerin' one question. What did you tell Tall-Corn about?"

"Nothin'," Flapjack broke in, " 'ceptin' yuh wuz Texas Gene. Hombre hatin' polecats, rattlers, an' varmints like Hodge an' Binyon. Any harm in that?"

"I reckon not," said Gene. "Go on. *How come Tall-Corn's here?*"

Flapjack chuckled. " 'Cause he *is* on yore side!"

"On my side?" repeated Gene.

"Yep!" declared Flapjack. "Took th' job at th' saloon jest tuh spy on Hodge. Proved he's on th' level, too. Spared my life! When he coulda shot me! He's got some information for yuh. Wait'll yuh hear it."

Instinctively, Gene knew Flapjack was telling the truth; Tall-Corn was okay. He felt as if someone had pulled him in from the edge of a high cliff over which he had been slipping. He let out his breath in a long, relieved sigh. Then, moving his hand away from his gun, he pushed his hat back from his forehead and laughed. Relief and embarrassment were both in the laugh. And the other two in the shed knew it. Gene could almost see them relaxing.

"I reckon I owe you an apology, Tall-Corn," he said finally. "I figured you were on Binyon's payroll,

sent by him to spy on me."

"Thet's what I s'picioned," said Tall-Corn. "Right off I'd spotted you fer a—uh—an hombre who'd be on the side o' the law. An' I knowed you'd never b'lieve it if I *said* I warn't no friend o' Hodge ner Binyon. Not after the way you looked at me in the tellygraf office. So I made up my mind to *do* somethin' that'd show you I was okay an' wanted to help put them varmints outa business. Thet's why I took the job at the Golden Arrer. An' dawgoned if'n I ain't found out some mighty interestin' things."

"Shore has!" chirped Flapjack. "Set down, Gene. Lissen."

Gene sat down and listened, but not until after he had closed the shed door, hung his coat over the window opening and lighted the small bull's-eye lantern he had placed in the shed earlier.

Flapjack started the story. When he had seen Hodge and Drake go into the back office and close the door, he had had a hunch their conversation would be well worth hearing. So he had slipped around to the back of the saloon where he had located the office window without any trouble. Luckily, the window had been open a couple of inches and the shade had been drawn. By pressing his ear against the crack, he had managed to hear most of what had been said.

All along, it seemed, Hodge had been suspicious

that Gene was not what he seemed to be. After the encounter in the saloon, Hodge's suspicion was practically a certainty. Now he was sure that Gene was a lawman of some kind. There was only one thing to do—get rid of him!

At that, Drake had laughed. Hodge's memory was plenty bad, he had said. Only that morning Hodge had told him he was going to let Texas Gene go on living until he knew for sure who and what he was, and how much he knew.

"I can change my mind," Flapjack reported the conversation between Hodge and Drake. "An' I'm still not goin' to send you, or anybody else, to gun that cowpoke down. We've got to be smart about gettin' rid o' him. If he *is* a John Law an' we bushwhack him, we're liable to have every lawman in the state on our necks. Maybe even the Rangers. An' I don't want *those* birds comin' in here. The jig'd be up as soon as they spotted me!"

At this point, Tall-Corn interrupted. "Are you a Ranger, Gene? Or oughtn't I ask thet?"

"You oughtn't." Gene smiled. "But I'll answer it anyway. I'm not a Ranger. Go ahead, Flapjack."

Flapjack frowned. "Couldn't hear th' rest real clear. They musta moved tuh git drinks. Heerd glasses clinkin'."

"Never mind that," said Gene. "Did you hear anything else?"



Flapjack Listened at the Window

Flapjack nodded. "Yep! Hodge sez fer Drake tuh start trailin' yuh. Startin' tomorra mornin'." His forehead wrinkled in thought; then he shrugged. "Thet's all I heerd. 'Cause right then thar wuz a noise ahind me. Turned eroun'. Thar stood this old galoot. P'intin' a six-gun straight at my stummick."

Tall-Corn cackled. "I jest wanted to find out who *you* was workin' fer. Kinda figgered you might be workin' fer Binyon."

"Binyon?" Gene echoed in amazement.

"Sure!" said Tall-Corn. "I wouldn't put it past thet piece o' crowbait to set a spy on his pardner."

Gene leaned forward, his face glowing with interest. "Are you sure Binyon an' Hodge are partners?"

Tall-Corn nodded. "Certain sure. I been keepin' my ears wide open."

"Oughtta been easy," chuckled Flapjack. "They're so big."

Both Gene and Tall-Corn turned on him.

"Keep quiet!" barked Gene.

"Shet up!" snapped Tall-Corn. "Or I'll—"

"Hold it!" Gene interrupted; he did not want Tall-Corn to go off on another talking spree. "Let's get back to Binyon an' Hodge. What do you actually *know* about their partnership, Tall-Corn?"

Tall-Corn leaned back against the woodpile and said, "I know they're pardners 'cause I seen Hodge give Lije Thaxter some cash a coupla days ago,

whilst you was out o' town. An' when Thaxter wanted to know was it from Binyon, Hodge said yes. 'Then he said, 'Y'know, Lije, my pardner's a real generous hombre. If'n he thinks you're liable to throw a gun down on him.' Then they both laughed. Don't thet prove it?"

Gene was noncommittal. "It helps," he said. "Anything else?"

"Not 'bout the pardnership," replied Tall-Corn. "But I diskivvered Hodge is the leader o' the gunslingers that've been pullin' all the raids an' settin' all the fires on the ranches round here. They got a hide-out up on Injun Ridge somewheres. Thet's where Hodge sent Thaxter today. Hodge was sure riled up at Lije fer threatenin' to gun you down on sight. Said he didn't want no gun play till he give the word. An' if'n Lije stayed here, wal, you'd be expectin' him to set his gun goin' when he saw yuh—an' he—Hodge, I mean, couldn't spare no more men, seein' as how Sleeper Jackson was laid up from yore shootin' him durin' the holdup t'other day." He paused, scratched his chin, and said a little disappointedly, "Reckon thet's all."

"It's enough!" remarked Gene. "It's the break I've been waitin' and hopin' for. Got any idea where this hide-out is?"

Tall-Corn shook his head. "Oughtn't be too hard to find, though. Hodge rides up there every after-

noon. It would be kinda easy to trail him."

"Does he go up to the hide-out on Sundays, too?" Gene asked.

"He's up there all day on Sundays," said Tall-Corn. "Lights out soon as he shets up the Golden Arrer on Sattiday night an' don't come back till Monday mornin'." He winked broadly. "Reckon he spends Sunday havin' a high old time."

Gene nodded. "More'n likely." He yawned. "Reckon *I'll* spend Sunday catchin' up on my sleep. One more question, Tall-Corn. How come you're so interested in seein' Binyon an' Hodge get what's comin' to them?"

Tall-Corn's face was solemn, even a little sad. " 'Cause, Gene," he said slowly, "Sam Hendricks was my best friend."

"I savvy," said Gene. He waited a minute, then grinned at Flapjack. "Shall we let Tall-Corn in on the secret, old-timer?"

"Secrut?" repeated Flapjack. Briefly, he looked puzzled but when Gene tapped his own chest, the oldster's face crinkled in a wide grin. "Shore thing! Go ahead."

"No," said Gene. "You tell him."

Tall-Corn was staring perplexedly at them both. "What in thunder are you two—"

Flapjack stopped him. Getting to his feet, he made a wide, flourishing gesture at Gene. "Tall-Corn Wil-

liams," he chuckled, "meet th' best deteckative west o' th' Pecos—Gene Autry!"

For the first time in his long and garrulous life, Tall-Corn Williams could not say a word.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TANGLED THREADS

Promptly at five minutes of ten on Monday morning, Roy Stubbs reined in at the hitchrack across the street from the Bank of Broken Bow. However, he did not dismount until he had seen Ezra Binyon enter the bank. Then he fairly bounced to the ground, tied up his horse and strode over to the bank door. He had two minutes to wait before the cashier, George Wells, would unlock the big door. During these two minutes, he stood motionless, staring stolidly at the brass doorknob. He was completely oblivious of the fact that a pair of eyes was watching him from behind the swinging doors of the Golden Arrow saloon.

A key grated on the other side of the door. Before Wells could grasp the knob from the inside, Stubbs turned it and opened the door. Pushing past the astonished cashier, the rancher strode to the closed door of Binyon's private office, turned the knob, and flung it open.

Binyon looked up sharply from the far side of the big desk. "What the devil!" he rasped.

"What the devil yourself!" returned Stubbs. He

did not stop to close the door behind him. He marched to the desk, pulled a money-bag from inside his coat and threw it in front of the startled banker. "There's your three thousand dollars, you old skinflint! Write me out a receipt an' give me back my mortgage! An' make it quick. I'm not hankerin' to breathe the same air you do any longer'n I can help!"

The scar at Binyon's mouth began to glow. "You—you—" he spluttered. "How dare you burst into my private office and—"

"Shut up!" shouted Stubbs. "An' hand over that receipt—in full!" He banged on the desk for emphasis. Suddenly he laughed, a triumphant, gloating laugh. "Gonna foreclose on me, were you? Gonna grab my spread like you've grabbed all the others!" His laugh grew more shrill. He sounded as if he were growing hysterical.

Binyon's eyes were blazing, but he said nothing. His hands trembled from the anger that gripped him as he opened a desk drawer and took out a strong box. He pawed through the box's contents until he found the paper he sought. Then he reached for a sheet of paper and his quill pen. For a couple of moments, he scribbled furiously to the accompaniment of Stubbs's semi-hysterical laughter. Throwing down the pen, he shoved the two papers across the desk toward the rancher.

"There's your receipt and your mortgage, Stubbs," he yelled. "Take them and get out!"

Stubbs snatched up the papers. He stopped laughing aloud while he scanned them but the triumphant laugh still lingered in his eyes. Then it vanished as he folded the papers and tucked them in the lining of his hat. He leaned over the desk, staring full into the glittering pale green, deep-socketed eyes.

"Ezra Binyon," he said in a voice filled with hatred and loathing, "your days are numbered, sure as shootin'. It won't be long before you'll be ridin' under a cottonwood tree—an' I'm hopin' an' prayin' I'm the hombre who's holdin' the other end o' the rope when you do!" Turning on his heel, he strode out of the office before Binyon could push his voice out past the choking rage in his throat.

For at least a minute after the street door slammed on Stubbs's back, Binyon did not move. Not even to blink his eyes. All at once, he became aware of a shadow in the doorway. He focused his eyes on it. It resolved itself into the short dapper figure of his cashier.

Wells cleared his throat. "Are you all right, Mr. Binyon?" he asked timorously.

"Of course I'm all right!" snarled Binyon. "Clear out and shut the door!"

Wells disappeared. The door closed. And gradually the redness left the banker's eyes and mouth



"Ezra Binyon, Your Days Are Numbered!"

scar. He unclenched his fists, rubbing his palms where his nails had dug into them. Blast Roy Stubbs! The Flying-S was a prime ranch. He had been so sure of getting hold of it. But now— Where had Stubbs got hold of three thousand dollars? That was a lot of money. It would make a nice addition to the little nest-egg he was hoarding against the day when he would slip out of Broken Bow and leave Hodge holding the bag. Hodge! Great guns! That cat-eyed devil might blow in any minute. If he saw the moneybag—

Quickly Binyon rose; he snatched up the bag, deciding to postpone counting its contents until later, and hurried to the big iron safe in the corner. He was twirling the knob to lock the safe again when he heard a latch click. He straightened and turned. Mel Hodge stood in the doorway, the characteristic, mocking smile on his thin lips.

"Might as well open that safe up again, Binyon," drawled Hodge, stepping into the office and pushing the door to behind him. "I'm plannin' to relieve you o' some o' that dinero Stubbs just handed over to pay his mortgage."

Binyon forced out a thin shrill laugh. "Are you loco, Hodge?"

Perching on the edge of the desk, Hodge kept his yellow eyes fixed on the banker's face. "I meant what I said, Binyon. Open up that safe an'—"

"I'll be hanged if I will!" declared Binyon. He walked back to his chair and lowered himself slowly into it.

"You're liable to get shot if you don't." Hodge made the threat in a conversational tone.

Binyon glared at him. "I told you not to threaten me."

"That's right—you did," Hodge sneered. "But it wasn't a threat, Binyon. It was a promise." He gestured at the safe. "Open it!"

Binyon's fist banged the desk so hard everything on it rattled. "No!" he shouted. In a lower, but equally harsh tone, he added, "What makes you think Stubbs paid me any cash?"

The mocking smile came back to Hodge's lips. "Because he was in the Golden Arrow Saturday night, flannel-mouthin' about how he was *goin'* to do it. An' because when he came out o' here just now, he was so blamed excited over *havin'* done it, he came right over to the Golden Arrow for a drink to celebrate." He snickered. "Told me where he got the cash, too. His wife inherited it last month. He didn't pay up before because he figured he'd get more satisfaction outa lettin' you think his spread was comin' to you—an' then crossin' you up at the last minute."

Binyon ran his tongue over his dry lips while he tried frantically to think of some way to avoid hand-

ing over any of the three thousand. If he could put Hodge on the defensive— An idea hit him. He immediately translated it into words.

"I can't spare much of it right now, Hodge," he said, "what with the monthly payroll to meet here at the bank and on *our* ranches. But I'll be glad to give you what I can spare—" Leaning both hands on the desk, he rose slightly from his chair before continuing, "—just as soon as you make good on your word to take care of Texas Gene." His lips curled. "I might have known what would happen, though, when you sent Drake after him. That hombre couldn't hit a barn door if he was standing right in front of it." He knew from the quick flush staining Hodge's brown cheeks as well as from the way the yellow eyes flickered that he had won a temporary respite. "Well?" he rasped after a moment. "Haven't you got any answer?"

Hodge nodded. "I told Eddie to lay off, to let that cowpoke go on livin' for a while."

"Why?"

"Because I figured it was the best thing to do," returned Hodge. His yellow eyes clouded reflectively. "But don't worry, Binyon. I'm takin' care o' Texas Gene, *muy pronto*. But I'm doin' it my own way—when I'm good an' ready." He slid off the desk edge. Halfway to the door, he turned back. "By the way, Binyon, how about that check for the Run-

nin'-R fire loss you were expectin'?"

The pale, gaunt face twisted itself into a genuinely worried frown. "It hasn't come," said Binyon, "and I don't know why."

There was the ring of truth in his words. For an instant, Hodge felt a twinge of worry, too. "That's mighty strange," he mused as much to himself as to Binyon. "Mighty strange."

Binyon tapped the desk top with nervous fingers. "The Great Western's never taken so long before to settle a claim." He seemed to be thinking out loud. "I wonder—"

Their eyes met, and each read in the other's expression what he himself was thinking.

"Muy pronto?" whispered Binyon.

Hodge nodded. *"Muy pronto."*

Eddie Drake was lounging inside the swinging doors of the Golden Arrow when Hodge pushed them apart a few minutes later.

"Texas Gene's over at Doc's," Eddie said quickly. "So I figured this was as good a spot as any to keep an eye on him. I—"

Hodge stopped him with an upraised hand. "Okay, okay!" he said impatiently, turning to give the saloon a quick surveying glance. Stubbs had gone. Only Nat and Tall-Corn were in sight. The former was painting fresh soapsuds pictures on the bar mirror; Tall-Corn was pushing his long-handled

broom across the back of the room. Hodge stepped closer to Drake. "I'm headin' for the hide-out pronto," he said softly, "to get the boys lined up for a big job."

Drake looked puzzled. "A big job? Where at?"

"Here in town," Hodge chuckled. "An' stop askin' questions. I haven't got it all thought out yet. But if I can work it, an' that cowpoke'll do what I figure he will—well, we'll not only get him out o' the way for keeps, the boys'll have a real nice bankroll to divvy up."

"They won't mind that." Drake's eyes glistened with greed. Then he thought of something and scowled. "What about me? If I'm trailin' Texas Gene, I won't get in on the job an'—"

"You'll get in on the cash," Hodge interrupted. "Don't worry about that. An' you'll be in on the job, too. Fact is, the job's goin' to depend on you—an' whether I'm guessin' right about what that cowpoke'll do one o' these nights."

"I don't savvy." Drake frowned. "What could he do that'd mean a big job for—" He broke off as Hodge raised a finger to his lips and flashed a sidelong glance toward Tall-Corn coming up the room with a dustpan in his hand.

Hodge headed for the bar. He smiled cruelly as he crossed the room.

Gene, who had been watching from Foster's office

window for some time, smiled grimly when he saw Hodge come out of the Golden Arrow and head down the alley toward the barn back of the saloon. So Hodge was fixing to ride this early in the day. Something important must have happened between him and Binyon. Gene turned from the window and hurried through the kitchen of the little house and out the back door.

Flapjack was fastening his pack on Jocko's back when Gene entered the barn. He looked up, his blue eyes bright with interest as they peered quizzically into Gene's. "Somethin' up?"

Gene nodded. "Hodge has gone to saddle up," he said. "An' Drake's still keepin' watch from the saloon, so you'd better get movin'." He hurried to Champion who stood at one side, saddled and ready to go. "Tall-Corn signaled me a minute ago. He's all set to give you a hand. Be sure to delay Drake at least ten minutes."

Grabbing Jocko's halter, Flapjack pulled the burro toward the door. "Quit frettin', Gene!" he chuckled. "Me'n Tall-Corn'll settle Drake's hash. Fer th' hull afternoon—er mebbe a mite less."

Eddie Drake could not for the life of him figure out how it happened that he became so involved with Tall-Corn Williams and the old peddler, Flapjack Hobbs, and a stubborn burro that he lost Texas Gene's trail and didn't know the cowboy had left

town until more than an hour after he had gone. When Mel Hodge finally enlightened Drake on the matter, it was too late for either of them to do anything about it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A COUPLE OF DISCOVERIES

An hour later Gene reined Champion in amid a thick grove of trees near the top of Indian Ridge. Over to the left, he could see Hodge's big black gelding moving up through a tumble of boulders. He could also see, higher up the ridge in a clearing, a fairly large shack crouched against a concave wall of rock forming a sort of huge pocket below the ridge crest. Around this shack several men were visible. A couple of them were busy with horses picketed near the shack. The others were merely lounging around. They were all too far away for Gene to see their faces, but he was sure he recognized one of them. There could be little doubt that the big burly figure was Lije Thaxter.

Suddenly he saw the men "freeze" and realized they had caught the sound of the approaching gelding. They were motionless scarcely ten seconds, however. Then they moved fast—each man running to a pre-designated post. Gene could see the sun glinting on their naked guns as they covered all the approaches to the shack. In spite of the fact that the gunmen were hardened outlaws and killers, he could

not help admiring the way in which they had been trained to defend their hide-out.

When Hodge rode into the open, the men swarmed about him. Their voices floated up to Gene in a faint chorus. He waited until Hodge had entered the shack, his men trailing him. Then, turning Champion around, he headed through the trees at an angle that, he hoped, would bring him out at the trail up which Hodge had ridden.

Fifteen minutes of cautious riding brought him to the trail. It was a very faint one. Had it not been for his ability to read signs, he would have missed it entirely. He decided to follow the trail down the ridge. It was risky business. There might be a look-out below. However, if the gang were to be rounded up eventually, he must find out where the trail had its beginning. He had been too far away to mark that spot when Hodge had turned into the trail on the way up.

Champion picked his way carefully and swiftly down through the rocks. When they were almost at the foot of the ridge, Gene noticed that the trail was narrowing to curve between high rocks not more than fifty feet ahead. At almost the same moment, his keen ears caught the thud of hoofs coming up-trail. He swept a quick glance around. Although the trail was a bit wider here, there was no place to swing off it, no place to hide. He must meet the coming rider

face-to-face; there was no help for it.

He pressed his knees against Champion's flanks. The great horse stopped in his tracks. The other rider was nearing rapidly. Gene leaned back in the saddle, giving the appearance of resting in it. In reality, his every muscle was tense, his every sense keenly alert.

A roan horse rounded the curve in the high rocks. And Gene's eyes gleamed with recognition. The horseman was Hack Hill, the spindle-shanked rough string rider from the Box-W!

A second later, Hill spotted Champion and Gene. He pulled his horse to a walk but said nothing until he was so close the roan's nose was almost touching Champion's. His narrow-lidded eyes surveyed Gene with malevolence. "What are *you* doin' up here?" he snarled.

Gene kept watching for the quick flick of the wrist that would indicate Hill was going for his gun as he drawled, "I could ask you the same question."

Hill's eyes narrowed until the pupils were pin dots. "I'm up here on business!" he snapped.

"Yeah," Gene nodded. "Owlhoot business."

Hill's eyes flew open with the sudden realization that Gene knew a great many things he had not said. In an attempt to throw Gene off-guard, he curled his lips in a half-smile. "Yuh've got me all wrong, Texas," he said. "I'm huntin' strays."

Gene gave an incredulous snort. "You're a bronc buster, not a stray man, Hill."

"Down on the Box-W," sneered Hill, "yuh do what yuh're told to do an' yuh don't ask questions. Not with Curly Ransome an' that Trask hombre around."

"An' up here," said Gene meaningly, "you do what Hodge says, an' you still don't ask questions."

"Meanin' what?"

"Meanin' you're one o' Hodge's hired gunslingers," barked Gene. "An' I'm takin' you—"

Hill was plenty fast on the draw but Gene was faster. The crack of the two guns came almost together. But Hill's bullet went wide of its mark while Gene's sent the bronc buster's gun spinning to the ground.

"Turn that cayuse around!" snapped Gene. "Fast!"

"My wrist," whined Hill. "Yuh've busted it." He cast a glance up the trail past Gene. A glance that said, as clearly as if he had put his thoughts into words, "If they only heard those shots up at the hide-out—an' I can stall a spell—"

Gene drew a bead on the other's chest. "I said turn that cayuse around, Hill," he said sternly, "an' make it snappy if you want to go on breathin'."

Apparently Hack Hill had no desire to die, for he swung the roan around and headed him down



Hack's Gun Fell to the Ground

through the rocks. Gene, his gun trained on Hill's back, followed so closely Champion was literally stepping on the roan's heels.

No pursuing hoofs sounded behind them but Gene did not stop listening for them until he and Hill were at least half a mile from the foot of the Ridge. Then he spurred up alongside the roan and yelled, "Pull up!"

When Hill had done so, Gene added, "Raise your hands above your head."

Hill hastened to obey.

"Climb down!" ordered Gene.

Again Hill obeyed with alacrity but when he saw Gene sliding from Champion's back, he looked frightened. "What're yuh gonna do?"

"Nothin' that'll hurt—much." Gene grinned. "Just tie you up an' take you over to the Box-W for safe-keepin'."

Cindy, Tod, and Johnny were all in the ranch yard when Gene rode in with his prisoner. And Gene could not help but chuckle at their collective amazement.

"You'd better close your mouths," he laughed as he dismounted. "You're liable to get your tonsils sunburned."

Cindy gulped. Tod blinked. And neither of them moved.

But Johnny came swiftly toward Gene, finding

his voice as he did so. "What's the big idea?" He pointed to Hill.

Quickly Gene explained, finishing with, "I brought him here because if I took him to town—" He stopped; Johnny was nodding.

"I savvy," said Johnny.

Gene smiled, again grateful for the understanding that existed between himself and the big cowboy.

"But I don't," complained Cindy as she and Tod came up.

Tod chuckled. "Then you're pretty dumb, sis."

Cindy stamped her foot. "I am not! But I don't see why Gene can't take him in to the sheriff. We're not running a jail."

Johnny grinned down at her. "Wrong, Cindy. We're sure runnin' one till—till Gene wants this varmint."

Cindy frowned. "But—"

Gene swung back into the saddle. "Looks like you'll have to do the explainin', boys. I've got to get back to town an' see the sheriff." He turned Champion but before riding away, he said sternly, "I'm holdin' you responsible for this coyote, Johnny. When I want him delivered in town, I'm countin' on you to have him around."

Johnny's gray-green eyes were as serious as Gene's blue ones as he came over to stand by Champion and look up into his old friend's face. "I've never let you

down yet, Gene. I'm not aimin' to do it now. I won't tell any o' the boys but Curly about Hill's bein' here. Between him an' me, I reckon we can stand twenty-four hour watch on him." A small smile crinkled his mouth. He doubled up one big fist and swung it through the air. "An' I sure hope he just tries to get tough." He waited for Gene's answering grin, then sobered. "You spoke about seein' the sheriff. Are you gonna spill the beans to him about what you found up on Injun Ridge?"

Gene shook his head. "Not yet. He'd want to take a posse an' head up there pronto. An' that *would* mess things up. Because, so far, we haven't got a smitch o' evidence against Hodge or Binyon or the gang. We've got nothin' but suspicion and hearsay. What I want to see Garey about is a little plan I'm cookin' up to *get* that evidence—or some of it."

"I savvy," said Johnny. "But don't forget one thing—when the showdown comes, I want to be there!"

Gene touched his spurs to Champion's sides. "Don't worry, Johnny. You will be!"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ROBBERY AND ATTEMPTED MURDER

There were clouds over the moon that night. Gene was grateful for them as he slipped through the darkness toward the Bank of Broken Bow. If they would only last until he had completed this dangerous—and perhaps foolhardy—mission.

There would not have been any danger about the mission, he thought, if he had only been able to explain his plan to Sheriff Garey. But Garey had not been in his office since morning; he had gone out to the Norton ranch to investigate a raid during which a big barn had been burned. Deputy Sheriff Bill Emerson had told Gene that. Emerson was young and plainly new on his job. Gene had not dared to confide his plan to him. Nor, after he heard about the Norton raid, did he dare to wait for the sheriff's return. He must get enough evidence to arrest Binyon or Hodge—or both—as soon as possible. This was vital for three reasons: to stop the wanton destruction of property, to protect the ranchers, and to finish the job Hugh Crane had given him.

He had laid his plans carefully and, so he believed, successfully shaken off Eddie Drake. Naturally

Drake had started shadowing him again as soon as he had reappeared in town. While he had been talking to Deputy Emerson, Drake had been across the street. While he had been eating supper in Carrie Lovell's, Drake had been lounging in the shadows near the hitchrack. Drake had trailed him to the hotel and even hung around the lobby while he had rented a front upstairs room. From the window of this room, Gene had spotted his trailer across the street. He had, therefore, undressed without pulling down the shade. Then he had turned out the lamp and darted back to the window. Drake had lingered in the shadows for a few more minutes. Then he had headed up the street and disappeared into the Golden Arrow.

Gene had dressed again, in the dark, and waited half an hour. Carrying his boots in his hand, he had then tiptoed down the corridor. There was a window at the end of the corridor. Noiselessly raising it, Gene had crawled out of it, hung by his hands for a few seconds and then dropped to the ground. Here he had put his boots back on. After that, it had been an easy matter to avoid Main Street and hurry through the shadows toward the rear of the bank. He had no idea that Hodge had figured he might be planning to give Drake the slip—and had sent the gunslinger back posthaste to keep watch at the back of the hotel.

Drake smiled to himself as he followed in Gene's silent footsteps. The boss was some smart hombre! For his part, he had thought Texas Gene was bedded down for sure. He had tried to persuade Hodge to that conclusion, but the boss had been firm.

"I don't care if you never get any sleep, Drake," Hodge had snapped. "I've got a hunch, an' I'm playin' it. It's what I've been hopin' for all along. Get back an' keep your eye on that hotel. If that ranahan leaves, you trail him." Then Hodge had smiled a very peculiar smile. "Might be you won't have to trail him very far before he lights. If that happens, hightail it back here an' tell me. Got it?"

Drake had nodded. And had gone to take up his lonely post behind the Broken Bow Hotel. He had been plenty sore at Hodge for playing some wild hunch, but he wasn't sore now. The hunch was paying off. He halted suddenly. What in thunder was that cowpoke up to? He'd stopped back of the bank! Drake tensed, then moved forward another step. His eyes popped open in amazement.

"I'll be hanged!" he muttered. "That dumb fool hombre's bustin' into Binyon's office!"

Trembling with excitement, Drake forced himself to wait until Gene had successfully jimmied the office window, pushed it open and climbed through it. Then he turned and ran at top speed for Hodge's office in the Golden Arrow.

Meanwhile, Gene was none too happy about his activities. Anything even hinting at illegal tactics was distasteful to him. However, fire must sometimes be fought with fire, he told himself as he quietly lowered the window behind him. Crouching on the floor, he pulled a tiny bull's-eye lantern from under his coat and lighted it. It was lucky that Binyon's office was at the back of the bank. Back here, there was little likelihood of the pencil-slim gleam of light from his tiny lantern being seen.

He was surprised to find that the desk drawers were not locked. At least, he was surprised until he noticed that the door leading out into the lobby of the bank had a triple lock on it. He grinned. Binyon wasn't half as smart as he thought he was. Putting a triple lock on his office door and leaving a lock on his window that had been the simplest thing in the world to jimmy!

Several minutes went by. Still Gene had not found the evidence he wanted although he had gone through all the drawers on one side of the desk. He moved to the other side, and chuckled softly as he opened the top drawer. In it were two strong boxes. Surely one of them must contain the evidence he wanted. Or—he tossed a glance at the big iron safe—maybe Binyon kept those papers locked in the safe? If that were so, they would have to stay there and he would find some other way to get the needed evi-

dence. He had never cracked open a safe; and he had no intention of doing so now.

All at once, the hairs on the back of his neck prickled. He slid the shield over the lantern's eye and moved his eyes slowly toward the window. Had a shadow passed across it? Or was he imagining things?

He stood perfectly still, every muscle tensed. There was no sound except the beating of his own heart. One minute. Two minutes. He bent over the drawer again, but he did not open the lantern nor did he feel reassured. His neck hairs were still prickling. Again he glanced toward the window. And knew why the feeling that danger was near had persisted.

The window was slowly opening. And the muzzles of two six-guns were pointing through it.

Gene slid to the floor, crawled under the big desk.

At that instant, a key clicked in the office door. Then it, too, began to open slowly.

A hoarse voice rasped from the window. "Step on it, boss! We've got him covered. He's under the desk."

Gene stiffened. Lije Thaxter's voice! He was trapped by the Hodge gang! But how had they learned he was here? Nobody knew—Eddie Drake! Drake must have only pretended to go into the Golden Arrow. Somebody, probably Hodge, had

outsmarted him!

"Don't make a move or a sound, Texas!" Hodge's low-pitched voice whipped through the office. "Or I'll blast you to bits."

Gene said nothing. He braced himself and waited to see what would happen next.

There was a glimmer of light in the office now. Someone else had a lantern. Gene could hear several pairs of footsteps; he judged they were going toward the corner safe. He could hear Hodge's voice again, too. Very close this time.

"Don't worry, Texas," Hodge was saying in that soft, sibilant whisper. "We're not goin' to gun you down. We're goin' to let the law string you up—for robbery an' murder!"

Gene's thoughts raced. Robbery? Murder? Whose murder? And what— He heard Hodge speaking again, farther away and harsher.

"Get a move on, boys!" Hodge rasped. "I told Drake to call out the sheriff in ten minutes flat from the time we left the saloon."

Gene shut his lips tightly to hold back the exclamation that threatened to escape them. Everything was suddenly clear! Hodge and his gang were going to blow open Binyon's safe, shoot down the sheriff when he showed up—and blame the whole thing on Texas Gene! It was a clever scheme! It was a clever trap! If he couldn't get out of it, the law might not

even get a chance to grab him. A mob might! His mind raced desperately. There must be *some* way out!

He drew his gun, taking almost a minute to do so lest he make a noise. Then, moving an inch at a time, he squirmed along the floor until he could see out from under the desk. Heart thumping against his ribs, he lay there rigid, scarcely breathing.

BOOM!

Simultaneously with the sound, Hodge whirled and sprinted toward the desk. Gene could see him in the light caused by the exploding dynamite, and he was ready for him. His hand snaked out, grabbed Hodge's foot and pulled hard. Hodge crashed to the floor.

The next few minutes were so confused, so full of action, Gene never did quite know what happened or in what order. He gained his feet, only to see Hodge's gun butt crashing toward his head. He ducked, but not far enough. The butt caught him on the cheekbone. Luckily, the blow was only a glancing one, hard enough to rock him but not stun him.

The office went completely dark as someone fell over the lantern. Gene lashed back at Hodge, but the man was not there.

"Beat it!" Hodge was snarling. "If you've got the cash. The game's gone flat."

"We've got the cash!" barked an unknown voice.

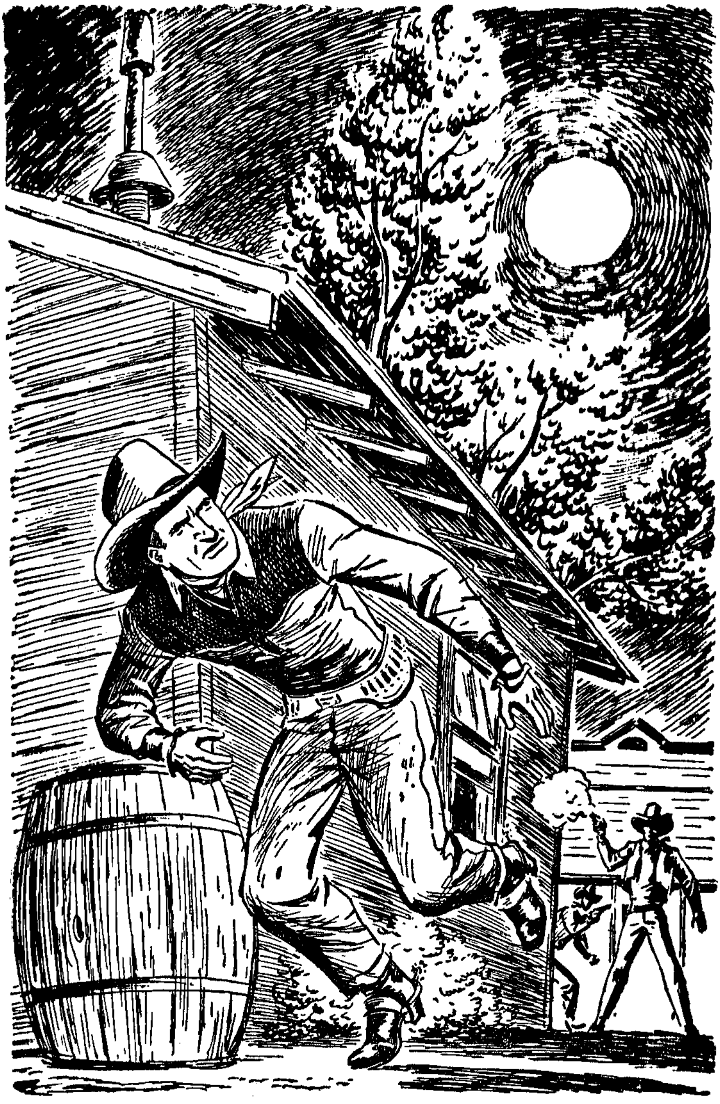
"An' the sheriff an' half the town's comin' up the street!" barked another one.

The man with whom Gene was now struggling broke loose. The darkness swallowed him. Gene whirled toward the window. The menacing gun muzzles were gone.

Shots echoed from the front of the bank. A man screamed in agony. More shots followed. Then horses—many horses—thundered down the street. A voice—Hodge's voice—yelled, "He's dead! Split up an' meet at the Forks!"

Heavy footsteps pounded across the lobby floor. Gene made a flying leap for the window, and another leap through it. He almost went to his knees when he landed but, by a superhuman effort, managed to keep his footing and race away through the darkness.

A shot rang out. And another. A bullet zinged past his ear. Then suddenly he was out of range. In the distance, he could hear many shouts and many running footsteps. For a second, he thought of cutting around and joining the crowd that, obviously, was rapidly gathering. But almost at once he changed his mind. He would have too difficult a time explaining how he came to be fully dressed and out of his room when the hotel clerk could, and would, swear he had *not* left the hotel by way of the lobby. Too, someone would be sure to ask how and where he got the lump that was swelling on his cheekbone.



Gene Raced Into the Darkness

He'd have to make himself scarce, at least for the night. He couldn't very well go back to the hotel and risk being seen in the lobby on his way to his room. Nor could he get back in the way he had left, through the corridor window.

Perhaps he could ask Doc to let him use the cot in his office for the night. Dr. Foster would gladly take him in, but he'd want an explanation of what had happened to the cheek too, and Gene didn't have time to do a lot of explaining now.

Nevertheless, he headed silently toward Doc's. But instead of going to the house, he proceeded with extreme caution, and made his way toward Doc's barn. He would get Champion and ride for the Box-W. He would not have to make any explanations out there. He could get some sorely needed sleep and decide what move to make next. He slipped into the barn. It seemed as if it had taken him hours to get there. In reality, it had not been more than fifteen minutes.

A great deal had happened in those fifteen minutes, however. Sheriff Garey had spent a very busy quarter of an hour at the bank. But Gene did not hear about it until the next day. Quietly he led Champion from his stall and saddled him. Then he rode for the Weyland ranch, ignorant of the fact that, during that quarter hour, Flapjack Hobbs had been arrested and charged with bank rob-

bery and the attempted murder of Deputy Sheriff William Emerson!

Finally in bed at the Box-W, Gene found that the sleep he so needed refused to come. But relaxing in the comfort of a soft bed he lay awake planning his next move. Perhaps the time had come to take Sheriff Garey into his confidence.

CHAPTER TWENTY

TWO CONVERSATIONS

Through the window, Sheriff Garey saw the big chestnut swing into the hitchrack in front of his office. He smiled grimly. He had been expecting this caller ever since he had turned the cell door key on Flapjack Hobbs. He swung his chair around until he was facing the door and waited.

The door flew open. Gene strode through it. His face was set and stern but his eyes were shadowed with worry. He stopped a few feet from the sheriff. "Reckon you know why I'm here, Garey," he said.

"Yes!" snapped Garey. "But five dollars won't get Hobbs out o' *this* jam! Emerson's goin' to live but—"

"I didn't expect money would free Flapjack," Gene interrupted. "But provin' he's innocent ought to!"

The sheriff snorted. "Innocent? He was caught red-handed. I grabbed him myself."

Gene nodded. "So Tall-Corn Williams told me."

"Did he tell you Hobbs was masked?" barked Garey. "That he was smack-dab in front o' the bank? That he had a smokin' gun in his hand?"

"Yes," said Gene, "an' he also told me Flapjack

was out cold." His eyes narrowed. "Who do you suppose could o' laid him cold? If he was one o' the gang, they wouldn't o' socked him. If he wasn't, though, they might o' done it to put suspicion on him, addin' one o' their guns to the picture for good measure."

Garey seemed a little unsure as he thought that over. "One o' them might o' bumped into him in the dark an'—" He reddened angrily as Gene laughed.

There was not much mirth in Gene's laughter, and none in his voice as he said, "I've known Flapjack Hobbs for a long time, Garey. It would take more than an accidental bumpin' to knock him unconscious."

Garey's anger yielded to surprise. "You've known him a long time?" he repeated. "But I thought—" His anger returned—"Say, what're you tryin' to do? String me along?"

Gene shook his head. "I'm tryin' to keep Flapjack from gettin' strung up for a crime he didn't commit." He gestured at a chair. "Mind if I sit down? It's a kind o' long story I came to tell you, Garey."

Now the sheriff looked puzzled. "Go ahead," he said, staring at the purplish bruise on Gene's cheek. For a moment, he looked as if he were going to ask about the bruise. But he did not. He sat and stared and waited for Gene to start talking.

Gene reached into his coat pocket. "Before I begin," he said, "I've got a paper here I'd like you to

see." He pulled out the envelope containing his credentials and handed it to the sheriff.

Garey's eyes widened incredulously as he scanned the paper. "Gene Autry!" he gasped. He looked at Gene as if seeing him for the first time. "I can't believe it!"

"You recognize the state seal, don't you?" Gene let himself smile faintly.

"O' course!" Garey was rapidly recovering from his astonishment. He looked back at the paper, then back at Gene. His dark gray eyes were no longer hostile; they were warm and friendly. And so was the handclasp he gave Gene as he said, "This is a great honor. I've always wanted to meet you, Autry."

Gene reddened. "Thanks, Sheriff." He replaced the envelope in his pocket.

"Why didn't you tell me who you were when you got into town?" Garey looked a little put out.

"I couldn't," said Gene. "I wasn't sure then whether you were workin' with Hodge an' Binyon or—"

"Hodge! Binyon!" exclaimed Garey. "What're you talkin' about?"

Gene pushed his hat back off his forehead. His head ached a little, probably from loss of sleep. "Reckon I'd better start at the beginnin', Sheriff, with the day Hugh Crane of the Great Western Insurance Company sent for me."

Garey leaned forward. "I know Hugh. Met him when he was up here visitin' his uncle, Dr. Foster." He made an apologetic gesture. "Sorry, Autry. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"That's okay," said Gene. "But I'd kind o' like to get this story told fast, so's Flapjack can get out." He chuckled. "Although it won't hurt that old galoot to be quiet for a while. He had no business stickin' his long nose into that fracas last night." He chuckled again, this time at himself. "Gosh, I'm gettin' to be worse than Tall-Corn when it comes to exercisin' my talkin' talents."

"Talk as much as you've a mind to," Garey said, grinning. "I'm drinkin' in every word."

Half shutting his eyes, Gene told his story. He traced every step he had taken and every clue he had uncovered from the time he had left Crane in El Paso to the moment he had walked into the sheriff's office. When he had finished, Garey was silent. But Gene knew that behind the cool gray eyes, the lawman's mind was weighing what he had heard and evaluating it.

At last the sheriff spoke. "What you told me about Binyon doesn't surprise me," he said. "I've known for a long time what a lowdown polecat he is, but he was actin' inside the law, I thought, so my hands were tied. But Hodge? That is amazin'! Oh, I knew Hodge was hard an' cold an' his friends weren't the kind o'

hombres we want in Broken Bow, but, like with Binyon, as long as I didn't catch them breakin' the law, I couldn't do anything."

"Right," said Gene. "An' there's blamed little we can do yet."

Garey scowled. "What do you mean?" he snapped. "I'll get a posse an' round up the whole kit an' caboodle an'—"

"On what evidence?" broke in Gene.

The sheriff blinked. "Why—uh—*yours!* You saw them robbin' the bank."

"I didn't see Binyon."

It took Garey almost a minute to catch the full significance of those four words. When he did, he flushed uncomfortably—and unhappily. "Confound it, Autry! That's right. I must be gettin' soft in the head." His jaw tightened. "Why, unless we corral that old buzzard along with all those other—" He let his voice trail away.

Gene nodded. "I'm gettin' an idea how we can rope him," he said slowly, "but it'll take quite a bit o' doin'."

"I'm game for anything!" Garey declared. "What is it?"

"Last night," said Gene thoughtfully, "after I heard Hodge yell that stuff about splittin' up an' meetin' at the Forks, I got to thinkin' about something Henry Norton said one day. He said he knew

Hodge had taken part in that first raid on his ranch, because he recognized Hodge's voice." He paused to look at the sheriff.

Garey was sitting tensely on the edge of his chair. He said nothing; he only made a motion for Gene to continue.

"Now," Gene went on, "if Norton could recognize Hodge's voice an' I could—well, maybe we could use that idea to bait a trap for these varmints."

"I don't savvy how," frowned Garey.

"Neither do I—yet." Gene smiled. He rose. "Let's go tell Flapjack he's a free man again. By that time, maybe I'll have something figured out."

Garey jumped to his feet and pulled a ring of heavy keys from his belt. "By glory!" he sputtered. "I'd clean forgot about him. Sure we'll get him out right now."

He led the way down the musty corridor to the tiny cell. "Hey, Hobbs, you're out," he called as he unlocked the door and let it swing back on rusty hinges.

There was not a sound in the cell. A dark pile in the far corner showed them where Flapjack was, but he didn't move. "What's happened to him? Was he hurt?" Gene asked.

"No, just knocked out and he was all right when I locked him up." The sheriff was as worried as Gene.

Gene bent over the still form and called, "Flap-

jack!" The bundle unrolled and Flapjack's eyes appeared. Deliberately he winked at Gene.

"Hi, there, Texas," he drawled.

"You ornery old-timer, this is no time to start your joking!"

"Now, Texas, I wasn't jokin'. I was asleep. Honest! No place safer'n a hoosgow for catchin' up on rest. Figured you'd be along and want me to do some more deteckatin'."

"That's right, I do need you and we've got to do this pronto!"

While this conversation was going on, another was taking place in Hodge's office. But whereas the talk between Gene and Garey was on an amicable basis, the other conversation was fraught with anger, distrust and hate.

Binyon had been waiting in the Golden Arrow since Nat Baird had arrived to open up. Hodge did not appear until an hour later. As he entered, Binyon rushed up to him.

"You blasted double-crosser!" the banker yelped. "You—"

Hodge clapped his hand over the scarred mouth. "Shut up, you old fool!" he snarled softly. "Do you want to spill the beans here?" He gestured at two open-mouthed, open-eyed patrons standing midway down the length of the bar.

Binyon gulped convulsively. He shoved Hodge's

hand away with a shudder. "But I want to talk to you!" he snapped.

Hodge jerked his head and started for the back office. "Then come on."

In the office, Hodge sat down in his swivel chair and sneered up at the rage-distorted face of his partner. "What's on your mind?" he drawled.

"You blasted well know!" rasped Binyon, his green eyes blazing.

Hodge grinned. "You're not upset 'cause me an' the boys helped ourselves to a little of our cash, are you?"

His rage choked Binyon. He looked as if he were about to strangle. But finally he found his voice. "Upset?" he raged. "Why wouldn't I be, you blasted double-crosser!"

"You already called me that once," said Hodge blandly. "An' I admit it. But what're you worryin' about? The bank's insured, isn't it?"

Binyon snorted. "At the rate of speed the Great Western *isn't* paying off claims, a fat lot of good that will do me." He took a deep breath. "I demand that you return that cash at once, Hodge!"

Hodge's laugh was loud. It filled the little office and beat against the banker's ears like the roar of a landslide. The scar at his mouth was like a streak of blood in the whiteness of his gaunt face. He stood the laughter as long as he could. Then he waved his

hands wildly in front of Hodge's face.

"Stop it! Stop it!" he shouted.

Hodge stopped. Then, as Binyon crumpled into a near-by chair and buried his face in his hands, he drawled, "Looks to me like you're breakin' up, Binyon."

The banker's face was haggard when he raised it from his cupped hands. "Maybe I am," he admitted. "I'm scared."

Hodge's eyes narrowed. "Then let's sell out our holdin's an' vamoose. A scared hombre's no good to me!"

Binyon shook his head. "I'll get over it. It's just that things have been boiling up and going wrong ever since Texas Gene hit town."

"I know," scowled Hodge. "I thought I had him where I wanted him last night. But that fool deputy Emerson was comin' up the street when the safe blew. He was on the spot before Drake even got a chance to call Garey out." When Binyon looked puzzled, he went on, "I pulled that job for two reasons, Binyon. After we made up our minds Texas Gene was a lawman o' some kind, I figured he'd be snoopin' around your office to get evidence on you. So I set Drake to trailin' him. I figured if he did break in the bank, I'd see to it he'd get caught in the act. An' if Garey got shot in the fracas, it wouldn't be too hard to stir up a lynch mob an' string that smart-aleck cow-

poke up to one o' those trees you planted a few years ago."

Binyon sighed. "It would have been a lot easier to shoot him," he said. He was feeling better. His brain was clicking again. He wanted to get away from Hodge so he could think about his plan for getting away from Broken Bow.

"Yeah," agreed Hodge, "but all I could think about was the Rangers comin' in an'—" He stopped short. "Oh, what's the use o' goin' all over that? I tried something. It didn't work." A smile played briefly about his thin lips. "That three thousand shut the boys up, though."

Binyon rose. "I've got to get over to the bank. I'll see you tomorrow. We can talk then."

"About what?"

"About Texas Gene and what to do next." Binyon sighed again. "I'm too tired to talk any more now."

"Okay," said Hodge. He stood up and fastened his yellow eyes on Binyon's pale green ones. "But get this straight, Binyon. Don't try skippin' out on me. 'Cause, sure as shootin', I'll follow you from here to Kingdom Come."

"Like before," said Binyon with a sigh, feigning weariness.

Hodge nodded. "Like before. Only next time you run out on me, I won't make any deals when I catch

up with you. You won't talk me into another one of your partnerships! I'm through letting you talk. From now on it'll be my gun that does the talking. I'll fill you so full o' lead, it'll take ten men to lift your coffin!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"TH' DING-DANGED BLOWOFF."

Both Binyon and Gene spent the rest of that day working on their separate, and widely diverse, plans. However, the banker worked on his alone, in the silence of his office while Gene worked on his with Sheriff Garey, Flapjack, and the town printer. No one ever learned of Binyon's plan; he never had a chance to carry it out. But all of Broken Bow heard about Gene's after he had carried it out.

The first inkling anyone had of anything unusual was Wednesday morning when Jess Mason walked out of his store to discover Tall-Corn Williams tacking a large poster to a near-by tree.

Mason walked over. "Howdy, Tall-Corn," he said genially. "What're you up to now?"

"Law business!" said Tall-Corn. "I'm workin' for Sheriff Garey."

Mason looked surprised. "You quit the Golden Arrow?"

"Yup!" Tall-Corn pounded another nail into the tree. "Got sick o' cleanin'. Besides, it's a heap sight more respectable, workin' for the sheriff."

Mason chuckled and peered at the poster, now

firmly attached to the tree trunk. A puzzled expression came over his face as he read the words on it.

MEN OF BROKEN BOW!
ATTENTION!

By right of the authority vested in me, I hereby order EVERY MALE RESIDENT in this town to be present in Town Hall at 4 o'clock p.m. this 10th day of Sept. Wednesday! Any man not appearing will be duly dealt with according to the processes of law.

Thomas Garey, Sheriff
San Juan County.

Mason turned to Tall-Corn who looked as if he were about to burst with excitement. "What's this all about?" he said, frowning.

Tall-Corn cackled. "You'll find out, Jess—come four o'clock!" He trotted away a few steps, then turned back to add, "An' yuh'd better be there! Sheriff Garey ain't foolin'!"

Mason's frown deepened. He went back in the store and called to his wife to come down and tend the place while he went out for a while. Then he crossed the street to see if Sim Peters knew anything about the meeting. Sim did not know so Mason walked down to Dr. Foster's. But the physician could not give him any information. Mason was a curious person; he kept on asking people. Consequently, by

noon there was not a man in town who had not either read one of the posters or talked to Mason.

Before three-thirty, Town Hall was packed with men. Some were a little annoyed at being so preemptorily summoned to a mysterious meeting. Some were curious; most of them were that. And a few were a little worried although they concealed this fact. Hodge and Binyon were in this last group. They were sitting on opposite sides of the hall but now and then they exchanged concerned glances over the heads of their fellow-citizens.

One thing nobody in the hall could understand was why a heavy curtain was draped across one corner of the speaker's platform.

Promptly at four o'clock, Sheriff Garey stepped out from behind the curtain. He was followed by five men, four of whom most of those present recognized as Texas Gene, Flapjack Hobbs, Tall-Corn Williams and Curly Ransome. The fifth man was a big cowboy with a freckled face. The only person who seemed to recognize him was Dr. Foster who occupied a front-row seat.

The sheriff walked to the front of the platform and held up his hand for silence. The gesture was wasted for there was not a sound in the hall. Silence had fallen abruptly as Gene and the others had taken their places in a row behind the sheriff, and the spectators saw that each of them was holding a naked gun.

"You all know about the bank robbery Monday night," began the sheriff.

A murmur of assent went through the hall.

"It's on accounta that robbery I called this meetin'," Garey continued. "I found a witness—I won't call him by name right now—who can identify the outlaw leader. He heard the hombre speak. He swears he'll never forget the voice. That he could pick it from a hundred voices."

Another murmur, slightly louder, swept from row to row.

"So I'm goin' to give him a chance," the sheriff went on. "He's standin' back o' that curtain where he can't see you but he can hear you. When I call out your names, I want you to come up on this platform an' say nine words. They are, 'He's dead! Split up an' meet at the Forks!' "

Hodge rose, his yellow eyes glittering.

"Sit down!" Gene's voice rang through the hall. "The first man who moves tastes hot lead!"

Hodge sat down again. He licked his lips and glanced across at Binyon. The banker was smiling a most unpleasant smile. Fear ran like a chill up and down Hodge's spine. He clenched his fists at his sides but made no further attempt to leave the hall.

"Sim Peters!" Garey shouted.

The telegraph operator hurried up onto the stage, spoke the words and looked nervously at the curtain.

Garey hid a smile and said, "Okay, Sim. You're clean."

Man after man walked up to the platform, spoke the words and was dismissed. Then—

"Ezra Binyon!" Garey called out.

There was confidence in every line of Binyon's bony frame as he walked up onto the platform. He was wearing a thin smile. And he turned toward the curtain when he said, in his rasping voice, "He's dead! Split up an' meet at the Forks!"

"Grab that man!" came a voice from behind the curtain.

Not only Binyon but every man in the hall went rigid. The sheriff grabbed the banker's arm as the curtain was pushed aside and Tod Weyland, his left arm still in a sling, stepped out onto the platform.

"That's the bandit leader!" declared Tod, walking toward Binyon.

Binyon tried vainly to shake off the sheriff's grasp. "It's a lie!" he screamed. "Would I rob my own bank?"

"I don't know about that," said Tod. "But I couldn't be mistaken in that voice. I—"

"You are mistaken! You are!" screamed Binyon. He whirled toward the audience and pointed a shaking bony finger at Hodge. "There's the hombre you want! Mel Hodge! He did it! He shot Emerson! He did a lot more, too. He and his gang of vicious killers!

They pulled raids! They—"

A gun cracked. Binyon screamed, grabbed at his shoulder and crumpled to the floor as Gene ran to the center of the platform, gun raised, and yelled, "Down, everybody! Fast!"

Everybody ducked—everybody but Hodge. He was running for the door. He did not make it, though. Gene's bullet caught him in the leg. He stumbled. Before he could regain his balance, half a dozen men had hold of him.

Supper at the Box-W that night was far from being an ordinary meal. In the first place, Hop Low had been advised of the outcome of the meeting as well as of the subsequent rounding up of the outlaws on Indian Ridge by a hastily mustered posse. Consequently, the old Chinese was in a jubilant frame of mind. And he had outdone himself with the preparation of the food. In the second place, there were so many guests for the meal, Cindy had been forced to borrow dishes from the cowhands' dining-room to accommodate everyone. For, in addition to herself, Tod, Curly, and Johnny, places were set for Gene, Dr. Foster, Flapjack Hobbs, Sheriff Garey, and Tall-Corn Williams.

At Cindy's insistence, no one talked shop until the meal was over and everyone was dawdling at the table over fresh cups of coffee. Then she leaned for-



Binyon Crumpled to the Floor

ward in her chair and smiled at Gene.

"All right, Gene," she said. "Let's hear all about everything."

So once more Gene told his story, with frequent interruptions from Tall-Corn and Flapjack. When he finished by briefly outlining the full confessions made by Hodge and Binyon, neither critically wounded, Tod jumped to his feet, coffee cup in hand.

"A toast!" cried Tod. "A toast to Gene Autry!"

"Not yet," Cindy frowned. When Tod sat down as abruptly as he had risen, she smiled again at Gene. "May I ask some questions?"

"Sure!" Gene grinned.

"Why was Ezra Binyon so nice when he first came to Broken Bow and so dreadful afterward?"

"He was workin' on the old proverb that you can catch more flies with honey than vinegar," Gene replied. "He wanted to make people trust him, think he was okay, so he could get powerful an' rich before they got wise to him."

"Yes," said Sheriff Garey. "An' if Hodge hadn't showed up, more'n likely Binyon never would o' gone in for the raidin' an' burnin' stuff. Hodge forced him into that racket by threatenin' to tell the law where it could find 'Banker' Groat."

Cindy frowned. "But if Hodge and Binyon were friends while in prison, why would Hodge do a thing

like that to him?"

Gene answered her. "Accordin' to Hodge's confession, Binyon had the Territorial Bank job lined up for a long time. He says they really worked it out together in prison. Binyon promised to wait to pull it until Hodge got out. But he didn't. He double-crossed Hodge an'—" He stopped; Cindy was nodding understandingly.

"An' Hodge double-crossed him!" cackled Tall-Corn. "By pullin' thet bank robbery!"

"An' Gene crossed 'em both up!" Flapjack chuckled. "Pertendin' Tod wuz a witness tuh th' robbery! Shore did th' trick! Yuh had Binyon figured right, Gene."

Gene nodded. "I had a hunch he'd start talkin' if he was accused. An' I had a hunch, too, he'd break down faster'n Hodge. Most vicious, cruel hombres have a weak streak some place." He glanced around the table. "Any more questions?"

Dr. Foster nodded. "Two! First, what about that insurance policy Binyon held on Norton's place? Will Great Western pay Binyon for Norton's losses?"

"No," said Gene. "I'm sure I can talk them into payin' Norton, though. An' the owner o' the Runnin'-R will get the money for that fire loss, too. Hugh's been holdin' up that check till I could find out what the score was up here. What's your other question, Doc?"

"*You* can't answer that one." Foster grinned. "It's about a date for a wedding." He turned to share his grin between Cindy and Johnny Trask at her right.

Cindy blushed prettily. "Neither can I," she said softly. "Ask Johnny."

Johnny gave Gene a long, slow grin. "Don't ask me," he drawled. "It all depends on the hombre who's goin' to be my best man."

Before Gene could say anything, Tod was on his feet again, coffee cup raised. "A toast!" he shouted merrily. "A toast to Gene Autry—for *my* money, the *best* man in the whole state o' Texas!"

Gene reddened. He invariably reddened when someone praised him. To him, rounding up the Badmen of Broken Bow was just another job.

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